

Sam's Interlude

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/39015741) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/39015741>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Relationships:	Ponk DropsByPonk/Sam Awesamdude , Sam Awesamdude & TommyInnit
Characters:	Sam Awesamdude , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , bad - Character , Skeppy - Character , Antfrost (Video Blogging RPF) , Cara CaptainPuffy
Additional Tags:	Body Horror , Mental Anguish , Grief/Mourning , Non-Consensual Body Modification , Loss of Humanity , Blood and Violence , Medical Experimentation , Medical Trauma , Abduction , Aliens , Alien Biology , Alien Cultural Differences , Human Experimentation , Humans Are Weird , Dismemberment , Amputation , does it count as amputation if it just kinda gets ripped off , Presumed Dead TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Vomiting , Survivor Guilt , Suicidal Thoughts , Reunions , Healing , Falling In Love , Guilt about falling in love
Language:	English
Series:	Part 11 of Human Error
Collections:	Fanfics I'd eat again at 3 am and already have , hixpatch's all time favorites
Stats:	Published: 2022-05-15 Completed: 2022-09-06 Words: 37,071 Chapters: 12/12

Sam's Interlude

by [teeth_eater](#)

Summary

Trapped aboard an alien ship full of poached humans, Tommy and Sam form a shaky bond of trust.

When their fellow cellmates start to disappear one by one, they lean on each other until the day comes that they're the only ones left.

And then Sam is taken too.

He'll do anything to get back to Tommy, to rescue him from those cages, from that hell.

He just doesn't know if he can make it in time.

Notes

Alright. Here's the dish, this is not going to be a lighthearted work. I really want to stretch my horror muscles, as psychological horror is my forte and most of what I've written as original works. I'm going to do my best to be unflinching at the topics covered here, but there will always be warnings at the top.

Also these chapters should hopefully be longer. Updates on Saturdays at 9pm

Thank you, enjoy.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Abduction(s)

Chapter Summary

Sam: if i had a nickel for every time I got abducted by aliens i'd have two nickels. it's not a lot but it's weird that it happened twice

tw//

-gun violence

-kidnapping

-vommit mention

Sam's world is dark.

Sam's world is a ship, a sacrifice of his life, his autonomy, his *body* , to something he never wanted. Something he'd never even known existed. Sam's world is made of rough metal shackles and bars on cages.

It's cold here.

That's all Sam could think when he first woke up in the hell in which he now lives. He had been bleary and confused, the last thing he remembered had been walking to work. He had thought to call his manager, to tell her he wouldn't be in that day. His hand had gone to his pocket, to call for help, to call his family or his job he doesn't know. His phone wasn't there. Sam had woken up a little more, alarm bells ringing. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but darkness. He blinked and rubbed his eyes with grubby hands, waiting for his eyesight to adjust to the shadows.

He was in a cell.

For a while, he thought he had been kidnapped, which, he technically had. There were other people in other crates, all of the same uniform size, all stacked on top of each other. He tried to talk to them, to ask what was going on, but most of them didn't speak English, and the ones who did wouldn't talk to him.

He realized how bad things had become when a guard came in for the first time, grabbing a woman by the arm and dragging her out. Sam shouted and shook the bars of his cage, anger and fear clouding his judgment, but when the guard glanced over to him Sam froze. It wasn't a human. It wasn't an animal. It wasn't like anything Sam had ever seen or heard about before.

'*Alien* ,' His mind supplies, but he shakes it away. 'No ,' He thinks. '*That's stupid.*'

The... the *thing* leaves with the woman and Sam sinks against the bars of his cage, heart racing.

" *What ...*" He breathes. He feels like he's going to puke. His hands are shaking. He's going to have a panic attack. Sam sucks in a shaky breath, feeling like he's breathing through a straw. He breathes in again and holds it, shutting his eyes to block out this...this horrible reality. He lets it go.

"You're okay," He whispers. "You're going to be okay." He breathes, eyes closed, legs crossed, for several minutes. The shaking fades, but the fear never manages to share that fate.

He falls asleep after that, and he knows he's been drugged because there's no *way* he'd be able to fall asleep under normal circumstances. He is startled awake by a slamming door, and when he raises his head he sees one of his captors carrying another person, a screaming and writhing person. They have something in their mouth to either muffle their screams or stop them from biting- probably both.

The person is thrown into the crate next to Sam's, their head slams against the wall with a painful sounding thud that has Sam wincing sympathy.

The door shuts again, sealing them all in darkness.

Sam watches the door for a moment to make sure it won't open again and then turns his attention to the person beside him.

"Are you alright?" Sam whispers, and the person's red-rimmed eyes flick towards him, mouth still strained around the gag. "Oh, right, come here." Sam beckons the kid over, because really they cannot be older than seventeen. The kid obliges and leans the back of their head against the bars of Sam's crate to allow him to untie the bonds.

As soon as the gag slips away the kid is yanking it from their face and gasping like they had just come up for air. They breathe hard for a minute, long enough that Sam has begun to fall back asleep.

"Thank you," They croak.

"Of course," Sam says.

They are quiet after that.

What is there to say?

Sam sleeps for a long time after that, only awoken by someone shaking his arm weakly. He blinks awake with a groan, seeing the kid straining to fit his arm through the bars of his cell to reach out to Sam.

"Oh, good, you're alive." The kid whispers.

"Mmm," Sam agrees, nearly asleep again already.

"Did you hit your head or something?" They ask.

"No," Sam whispers. "Drugged."

The kid pulls their hand away, looking unsure. Sam falls back asleep.

He is awoken again when the kid nudges him awake. Sam grumbles but opens his eyes to see them holding out some sort of food.

"They skipped over you," The kid says in low tones. "I saved you some of mine."

"What is it?" Sam asks, shuffling closer to the kid and taking the bar out of their hand. They shrug, mouth full.

"Some sort of food," They say, muffled. They swallow thickly and take another bite. "It tastes awful, but... you know. Food is food."

Sam takes a bite and almost immediately gags. The kid is right, it *is* awful. He nearly spits it out, but his stomach growls traitorously, and he forces himself to swallow.

"Yeah, not sure what kind of schedule aliens have for feeding times, but I'll wake you up next-"

"They're not aliens, don't say that." Sam snaps, shoulders rising in agitation. The kid looks a little taken aback, then frowns.

"Trust me, big man, I was out there. I saw those ugly mugs all up close and personal. They weren't human."

"They weren't *aliens*," Sam stresses. "They were- they were wearing *costumes* or something. Aliens aren't *real*."

"Whatever you say, man." The kid sighs, taking another bite of his bar. They eat in silence for a while, and after Sam is done and has wiped the crumbs onto his pants he sighs.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," Sam says, and the kid's eyes flick to his face. Sam can see the red rims, the bags under his eyes that speak to a lack of sleep and suddenly feels even worse for losing his temper. Sure, he's under a lot of stress, but they all are. They've been kidnapped, and if this kid thinks it's aliens- which it is *not*, then it might be helping him cope. "We've gotta stick together to... to survive this, kid."

"Tommy," The kid says. "It's *Tommy*, not kid."

"Right," Sam says. "I'm Sam."

"I know," Tommy says, smirking. "I can read your nametag."

Sam glances down to his front to see that, sure enough, his nametag is still clipped securely to his coverall pocket.

"I was on my way to work," Sam defends, and Tommy laughs. Sam smiles, for the first time since he'd arrived here, and knows he's going to do whatever it takes to shield Tommy from the worst of whatever is to come.

Two months and eighteen days.

Sam has been using a screw he found in his pocket to scratch a tally of the days into the floor of his cage. He's starving, skinny and pale now. Tommy is not much better. Sam's birthday has come and gone. He is twenty-three now. He had made no mention of it when the day rolled around. He didn't want to think about it.

It *is* aliens. He has long since accepted that as fact. It can't be humans that speak in that unintelligible languages over his head while they inject him with strange liquids and cut him open like he isn't conscious. Like he can't feel pain. It *can't* be. Their faces are warped and twisted, many of them buglike, some like animals, some like birds. He hates every one of them with every cell in his body.

He is sick a lot these days. Tommy tries to help, gives him extra portions of his food, which Sam refuses, because *really*, Tommy is a growing boy and should not be worried about giving up food to an adult. It's going to give him a *complex*.

Whatever the aliens are giving him, his body is rejecting it. He's vomiting almost every day, shaking and sweating constantly. He hates it. He *hates* it, and at the same time, he's glad it's him.

There comes a day, closer to three months than two, but it's getting too difficult to press the screw hard enough to make a mark, so he's not quite sure of the date, when there are only three of them left.

Sam, Tommy, and a woman with whom they've had little conversation, as she speaks no English and they speak no Mandarin. Her name is Yiu Chu and she spends most of her time humming. At first, it was annoying, but after all this time it became a reliable constant.

One of the aliens came in that day, and dragged Yiu out by her hair, she was too weak to struggle, but she still had the energy to scream.

Sam and Tommy both plugged their ears until the screaming stopped.

She did not come back.

Tommy and Sam didn't talk about it. They knew that this wouldn't last. That Sam or Tommy would eventually be taken away from each other. Killed or sold or some other thing too horrible to name, they don't know. It's not like anyone that was taken away could tell them.

So they wait, and they eat their rations and endure the experiments and *pray* to be left alone.

But the day comes.

Sam is awoken by his crate door opening and an armored guard tugging at his arm for him to get up. Tommy wakes up too and starts to shout and shake the bars, snarling and gnashing his teeth, acting every bit the animal they wanted them to be.

"Don't fucking touch him you bitch!" Tommy shouts, and Sam tries to give the boy a reassuring smile as he is being dragged away, hands pinned behind his back.

"It's just another experiment Tommy," He says. "I'll see you soon."

"I- okay," Tommy says, hands going slack around the bars of his cell. "Just- stay safe. Give em' hell for me."

"Always," Sam says, keeping his smile plastered on his face. "Be brave, kiddo."

That was the last thing he had ever said to Tommy.

As soon as the door shut his smile dropped and he went limp. He was too tired to fight anymore. He just wanted to sleep.

He didn't even get that. As soon as he was laid on the operating table, with no small amount of relief that it was just a regular experiment, which is grim in its own right, there is a thud, and the lights go out.

Sam stares at the blackness for a few moments, thinking that perhaps *now* is the time, now he can attack his captors where they cannot see him coming, he can get Tommy and he can *go* .

Then the exhaustion takes over again. Where would they go? They don't know how to fly the ship, they have no way of knowing if these aliens can see in the dark.

The emergency lights flicker on, bathing everything in red, and the chance is gone. It doesn't matter, Sam couldn't have taken it. He's too tired. He's too sick.

The aliens make what must be a noise of distress, but Sam cannot raise his head. He hears movement in the doorway, the clipping of hooves, the clicking of what sounds like stone on metal. None of the aliens he knows about sound like that, and still, Sam does not raise his head. What does it matter, when they're all the same anyway. Willing to destroy human's lives and bodies for *what* ? Science? This goes beyond science, this is *cruel* .

There is a thud and a shriek and that is when Sam turns to look. One of his captors is on the floor, hands bound. For a moment, terrible hope rises in Sam's chest, he thinks that maybe humans have found them. Will take them back to Earth, save them. He turns to look, and the hope fades as soon as it had arrived.

It is a menacing sight. Easily eight feet tall, a crown of horns reaching up to scrape the ceiling, black as a starless sky, apart from the wide, white eyes that blink down at him.

For a second, Sam stares. Is he dead? Is *this* what the grim reaper looks like? Then, the creature speaks, the same horrible language that his captors had muttered, and anger rises in him. Of course, another *fucking* alien.

"Go," Sam snarls. "Get *away* from me."

The creature kneels down, reaching like he is trying to *pick Sam up* , which is an *imeditate* problem. Sam scrambles back, falling off the table and ignoring the sting of pain from the fall, and tries to run back to the room with all the cages, to get Tommy and *get out* while their captors are distracted. His energy is back now, all this terror making way for adrenaline.

He shrieks in fear when he realizes that the large demon-looking alien is *chasing after him*. He tries to run faster, but after months of neglect to his health, there is no way for him to outrun the creature.

He is grabbed from behind, and he screams louder than he ever had before. Is *this* what had happened to the other humans? Taken away by some third party? To a potentially *worse* place?

" *NO !*" He screams, arching against the touch. It doesn't do anything, he is taken up into their arms, and no amount of writhing seems to change it.

"*MY KID !*" He screams, so hard that his throat aches with the effort of it. "*PLEASE! PLEASE I HAVE TO GET HIM!*"

The alien shows no reaction. They flinch away from the noise, but there is no movement to put him down, to take him back to Tommy.

"Please," He huffs. "Please, *please* , just- LET ME GET TO HIM!" He resumes his struggles to the best of his ability but the alien doesn't budge.

He twists in their grip, trying to get free, but succeeds in nothing but seeing that behind the horned alien there stands a small group of them, strangers he's never seen before. He sucks in a breath through his teeth at the sight.

One of them is holding a gun. A masked creature with three-clawed talons and a long, thin tail.

"CAN ANY OF YOU UNDERSTAND ME?" Sam shouts, tears running down his face. "*YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND ME- MY KID IS BACK THERE!*"

There is no reaction. Sam arches his back and screams at the top of his lungs, willing his captor to put him down, to let him get back to Tommy.

They are speaking now, something he can't understand, something he'll never understand, over his head like he's not there.

The horned one is looking away, looking behind him, at the members of his group.

Sam conjures up all the energy he has left in his body and bends his leg close to his body before snapping it up directly into the alien's jaw. Its head snaps back and it makes a noise of pain, but its grip loosens and Sam falls to the ground. He is back on his feet in an instant, staring at the group, low to the ground, ready to do whatever he needs to do to get out of this.

The horned one has stumbled a few steps back, clutching its jaw.

There is a gun on the table. *There is a gun on the table.*

Sam grabs it, holding it by what he hopes is the handle with his shaking hands. The group freezes when he points it at them, gritting his teeth. One of the aliens steps forward, one that appears to be made up of crystal.

"Get *back* !" Sam spits, gesturing with the gun. "I'll shoot you, I swear."

The horned one steps in front of the crystal one, and Sam steps back, keeping the gun trained on them, keeping his teeth bared. He moves slowly towards the door with the cages, the door that Tommy is stuck behind.

He reaches for the handle, and he finds nothing but smooth metal. He snarls in frustration and turns to look.

There is no handle, there is a keypad.

He doesn't know how to open the door.

He hears a shot go off and startles, instinctively looking to the gun in his hand. It remains still and quiet. He looks up. The masked one is holding a now smoking gun, several eyes wide behind their mask. Sam looks back down at his stomach, where a dart is nestled. It doesn't hurt. He needs to... he needs to find someone. The gun falls from his slack hands.

He takes a step forward, barely feeling it when his knees collapse from underneath him.

His head hits the floor.

Unwelcome Home

Chapter Summary

the badlands crew: omg weve never seen this species before so cool!

sam: i am literally going to kill them

tw//

-gore

-vomit

Sam dreams that Tommy is running by his side, looking stronger than he's looked in weeks, and the emergency lights are blaring but it doesn't matter because they're *free*, they're going to be okay. They're going to live and keep living and even if the future looks different out here in space, it'll be okay because they're *together*.

Tommy turns to him, smiling. Sam smiles back.

He wakes up with a gasp, flailing frantically. He kicks what feels like blankets off of him and stands. He reaches out to find Tommy, to make sure he's okay, but his hands meet nothing but empty air. He sucks in a sharp breath.

Where is he? Is he still on the ship? Is Tommy?

He doesn't waste any time, getting to his feet, having to brace himself against a nearby wall when his head spins. The lights are bright in here, horribly so, to the point he can barely see, so used to the darkness of where he'd called home for the last three months.

"TOMMY!" He screams, cupping his hands to his mouth to make himself even louder. He waits, heart pounding in his ears. There is no response beyond the echo of his voice bouncing off the walls.

"TOMMY!" He tries again. "IF YOU CAN HEAR ME YOU HAVE TO ANSWER ME!"

There is nothing. Sam shrieks through gritted teeth, grabbing at the sides of his head, bending in on himself as panic takes hold.

"PLEASE!" Sam screams, tears springing to his eyes. "PLEASE YOU HAVE TO ANSWER ME!"

There is nothing but ringing silence. Sam screams in frustrated terror, banging his fist against the wall. It doesn't budge, of course. It does nothing but leave him with a sore hand.

He slumps against the wall, breath heaving, exhausted. He slides to the floor and puts his face in his hands, breath stuttering.

How could this have happened?

He needs to get out of this room and back to the holding area, back to Tommy, to let him know that he's okay.

He raises his pounding head, looking for any sort of exit, squinting in the terrible florescent lights. There are wooden boxes stacked high around the edges of the room, almost up to the ceiling. It's very tall, at least ten feet, which makes sense if this is a place the horned alien frequents, but it makes Sam anxious after so many months confined.

His eyes catch on a metal door, apparently the only exit in this too-bright, too-big room, and he stands, lumbering towards it.

He hears movement from behind it and freezes, crouching low and pressing his ear against the cold metal plane of the door. He hears that same alien language from before, spoken in whispers, like they didn't want him to know they were there.

He waits. He knows he can't get any information out of listening to their conversations, but... what else is there to do but sit and wait?

His patience is rewarded. There is a beeping sound from the other side (what he can only assume is another *insufferable* keypad), and the door cracks open. The horned one, who Sam has started to call 'Eyes' in his head because of the white glowing circles that take up half its face, pokes its head through the crack in the door and looks around. It visibly startles when it doesn't see Sam, and that's when he strikes. He kicks out at Eyes' long, goat-like legs, catching it right in the backward bend of its knee. Eyes goes down with a yelp, and then Sam is out the door and running down the hallway. He laughs a little as he sprints, not looking behind him. If Eyes is anything like humans it'll be a while before it'll be able to chase after Sam.

He runs into the one who had shot him, now dubbed Mask for the sake of convenience, who looks at him with comically wide eyes. It says something that Sam can't understand, but Sam doesn't care, he shoulders past the alien without a word, rushing down the hall. He has to find the holding room. He has to find Tommy.

There is no other option. He has to. He *has* to.

He runs, ignoring the aching of his legs, the trembling of his arms. He has to ignore it because he has to find Tommy. He can't leave him alone, he's just a *kid*.

"TOMMY!" He calls, banging on doors as he goes, looking for any shred of familiarity. There is none.

This doesn't look anything like where he'd come from, it looks... almost friendly. There are drapes hung over wide, star-filled windows, thick tapestry, warm yellow light, clothes piled up in corners, papers strewn over tables.

The air smells different, warmer. Sweeter.

He shakes the thought out of his head and keeps looking, vaulting over chairs and tables and shouldering through doors.

He can't find anything familiar. He heaves breath through his teeth, sweating and shaking. He slams against a door and it creaks under his weight, he shoulders it again and the metal gives, crumpling underneath him as he falls into the room.

It's the same hallway he had run from.

He had gone in a circle around the entire ship and had seen nothing familiar.

He's been moved. Tommy isn't here.

He lifts his face to the ceiling and screams.

He hadn't fought them when they came to force him back into his new cell. He wanted to. *God* did he want to, but he couldn't. He was exhausted, he was in shock, he needs to find Tommy he just- he doesn't know how to do that.

A cat- or something that looked like a cat but probably wasn't- had been the one who found him at the end of the hall. It had watched him for a few seconds, and Sam watched back. He had the strange urge to kneel down and hold his hand out for the cat-thing to sniff, but he refrained. If that thing bit him who knows what kind of alien diseases he would get. The cat stared at him with strangely intelligent eyes before turning around and leaving, split tails intertwining as it walked. Sam knew it was probably going to alert someone of his presence, but he can't move. He sinks to the ground and stares at the hallway.

Tommy isn't here. He doesn't know how to get back to him, he has no idea what these new aliens have planned for him. This is somehow *worse* than before.

At least on the last ship he knew what was coming, he knew what the experiments held, who was going to do what to steadily orchestrate the failing of his body. Here, he knows nothing and he's completely alone.

And now so is Tommy, the last human on that ship.

He wonders if he's realized Sam is gone yet. He hopes not.

He hears footsteps behind him, hoofbeats with a slight limp, which tells him it's Eyes approaching. He doesn't turn to look. What's the point? Eyes speaks, echoey and mumbling and completely meaningless to Sam. He doesn't react. He's tired.

A hand is on his shoulder and he whips around, his exhaustion being wiped away by fear.

"Don't touch me, you-"

Another shot goes off, and Sam grows weary again. There is a dart in his arm. He stares at it tiredly, then looks to Mask. Rage rises in him. How dare they sedate him over and over like this, like- like he's some sort of *animal*. The hate burns behind his eyes and he lunges forward to- to do *something* to Mask. Maybe he wants to kill it. Maybe he wants it to kill him. He'll never find out, because his legs collapse underneath him again and he is unable to get back up.

Either he's developing a tolerance to whatever sedative they're pumping into him or they used a weaker dose, because he's able to stay awake this time, though he's still too tired to move. His head spins when Eyes picks him up, and he wants to throw up onto it, just to spite it, but he doesn't even have the energy to do that. If he vomited now, he'd probably end up choking on it anyway, and he doesn't want to find out if aliens know how to do the Heimlich. Or if they'd even care enough to do so.

He is dumped back onto the floor of the storage room he'd fled. The blankets are pulled back on top of him, and he feels like it's going to suffocate him but he can do nothing to push them away. He can do nothing at all. He curls into a fetal position.

The aliens speak over him for a while, in whispers, though it's not like Sam could understand them anyway. He can tell it's some sort of argument, which doesn't bode well for Sam's fate, in his own opinion. They leave, and the door shutting behind them feels final.

The lights dim. Sam does not sleep. He lies still and he *hates*.

Time passes. The lights come on again. Sam has still not moved, he has not closed his eyes. He has been staring at the wall, imagining the ways he'd kill them all and escape, get back to Tommy.

The door clicks open. Sam's eyes flick to the opening. Mask steps in, and the door shuts behind him. It's holding something, a tray maybe.

It's a bold move to actually come this close to Sam to feed him. Maybe Mask has some sort of weapon again.

Sam doesn't move from where he's curled, only follows the alien with his eyes as it paces closer to him. The alien is talking, though seemingly to itself, unless it thinks Sam has suddenly developed the ability to speak alien overnight.

The alien sets the tray down and sits across from Sam, watching him interestedly. It strikes Sam suddenly that they see him as an animal, which- of course, he knew, but to be stared at like a zoo animal, like this alien thinks it could *train* him... he knows the other aliens might kill him if he attacks Mask, but the only real challenge would be Eyes. If he can pick off the rest of them one by one he might have a chance.

Mask pushes the food closer to him. Sam watches him for a few more seconds before sitting up in a mirror of Mask's position. Mask seems to perk up a little, even as Sam positions his legs underneath him as inconspicuously as possible.

Sam lurches forward, unbalanced. Still weak from the hell of the last few months. Despite all that, he is no less dangerous than he was on Earth. Quite the opposite, he has found himself to be much more vicious, full of hate and bitter, evil thoughts about what he could have been if he had just been left alone. And now? Now all he had left is *gone*. He is worse than dangerous.

Now he is inhuman.

The alien scrambles back, kicking out at the tray and scattering the strange food over the ground. It does nothing to deter him. He crushes a soft, cake-like thing under his boot as he grabs the alien by the front of its *stupid* flight suit. Its hands come up to claw at Sam's arms, but they do nothing but tear the fabric of his coverall. If it drew blood then Sam can't feel it. He can't feel anything.

He hurls the alien into one of the stacks of boxes, which wobbles dangerously. Sam almost hopes it falls, crushes them both, just to end all this awful, stupid, worthless shit.

It doesn't. The boxes remain stacked to the ceiling and the alien sits at the bottom, splayed out, listless and confused. Good. That makes two of them.

Sam steps forward just as the alien pulls something out of its suit pocket. It's a thick black box, and though Sam doesn't have the foggiest idea what it does, he's already been shot by this dickhead. *Twice*. If it is a weapon, Sam's not going to let it get the chance to use it. He grabs for the object, but the alien turns away, holding it to its chest, trying to stop Sam from grabbing it. Sam snarls wordlessly and grabs the alien's shoulder to force it to turn around, the alien hisses out what could be curses in whatever gibberish language it speaks, and then Sam has the box in his hands.

Looking at it closer, he can see an absolutely *ridiculous* amount of buttons and a small screen. A communication device, if Sam had to bet.

Sam whips it at the wall and watches as it explodes into a million useless pieces. The alien watches too, eyes wide. It turns to look at Sam once all of the pieces have hit the ground.

Sam stands over it, completely remorseless. It almost scares him how little pity he feels for the thing beneath his boot, but then again. It stole him away. It took Tommy away and now Sam has no idea if he's safe and the kid he's come to think of as his has *no one*.

Sam brings his foot down.

He had been aiming for the alien's chest, hoping to cave it in and end this whole mess, but it had rolled out of the way just in time, and Sam's boot came down on its upper arm instead. The alien shrieks in pain and grabs its shoulder, trying to jerk its arm free from where Sam has it pinned. Sam doesn't release it.

This is about vengeance. This is about *sending a message* .

He brings his boot up, and before the alien can move again, slams it down. The alien screams, so loud that Sam almost wants to cover his ears. He doesn't have a lot of time, the other aliens would have heard that. They'll be coming. Unless they expected this, unless this alien is some sort of sacrifice.

Sam can work with that.

His boot comes down again and again, and the alien never stops screaming, never stops to take a breath. It must have bigger lungs than a human. Sam pins its arm down again and watches it struggle with a detached sort of fascination.

"You could have just left me there," Sam says quietly. "I don't want to do this. I just wanna go home."

Sam grinds his heel into the wound and the alien spasms with the pain, letting out a ragged sob. A sting of regret sparks in Sam's chest, but then he thinks of all the times those other aliens laughed when he was in pain, when they hurt him just to hurt him. The spark dims.

They would do the same to him.

They *have*.

"Why couldn't you have just *left me* ?" Sam screams, slamming down his foot one final time.

There is a wet crunch beneath Sam. The alien is just staring at him, tears streaming down its face. Wetting its mask.

It cries like a human.

The floor is wet beneath Sam's boot. Cherry-red and glistening. There are what looks like chunks of bone in the mess. Sam takes his boot off of what's left of the alien's arm and they immediately scramble back. The arm hangs limply in the long sleeve. They clutch the dead limb, mouth gaping, breath haggard. They try to get to their feet, but fall back when Sam takes another step forward.

Sam's shadow encompasses it.

He drops to his knees and rests his hands over the alien's throat, almost gently if not for the promise of what he's about to do.

"I didn't want to hurt anyone," Sam breathes, shaking. "But now I've got no choice."

Just as his fingers begin to tighten, the alien brings up its remaining arm to hold back Sam's wrist.

"Wait," The alien whispers, so quietly that if Sam had not been so close, he would have thought he was hearing things. "Please, no."

Sam lets go, stumbling backward and falling into the puddle of blood the alien had left behind.

"You-" Sam stammers, trying to get to his feet but finding his knees too shaky to do so. "You-"

The door is kicked in.

Sam whips around immediately, bringing his hands up in defense. The demon is at the head of the group, tail lashing in fury. The beast surges forward, shouting wordless things and spreading its arms. Sam nearly giggles at the body language, almost identical to the way he used to scare off raccoons back on Earth. It's not funny, though. Not really. It's just another reminder of how they see him as an animal. He shifts his weight and hears the squelching of the warm blood that has soaked into his socks.

Maybe they're right to think so.

Eyes backs him into a corner, shouting all the while, puffed up in anger or fear Sam doesn't know. Sam stretches his arms out around Eyes, trying to get back to Mask, to get them to talk to him again, to tell them about Tommy, but there is a group of aliens surrounding them. Sam watches as Mask stands, with help from the goatlike alien, and their arm swings loosely in its sleeve. Sam thinks perhaps he had just broken it until the dead limb succumbs to gravity and slides out of the sleeve with a disgusting wet sucking noise, like the sound of a fruit being torn in half, and it hits the ground with a dull thud.

Mask looks at the detached limb with glassy eyes until they are led away by the goat-alien, looking shocky and distant. Their eyes never leave what's left of their arm, not until the moment they are ushered out the door.

Once the aliens have left, only Eyes and Sam are left in the room. One of them picked up the arm and took it with them. Sam hopes it can be reattached, but... probably not.

Eyes is just looking at him, its chest rising and falling with deep, ragged breathing. Sam thinks that Eyes might kill him. He doesn't care. He shakes his head. No. He *has* to care. He has to get back to Tommy. He just... is exhausted right now.

Eyes stares at him with an expression Sam could never hope to decipher. It doesn't reach forward, it doesn't lunge like Sam had to Mask.

It sighs, and it walks out the door.

The blood was red. That's what Sam thinks the next time he can think anything. It doesn't smell like human blood, it's just a little sweeter, but it looks like it. It isn't getting brown, it isn't flaking off the floor, and it's just a bit thinner, but if he squints, it looks like human blood.

He looks down at his hands.

His palms are all red. He turns them over to see the cracking skin on his knuckles, his bony, shaking fingers, the blue tint to his fingernails.

When had he gotten so sick?

When had he lost himself so completely?

Alien or not, he had just taken off someone's arm, and they weren't even trying to *do* anything.

Sam stares at the crushed, blood-soaked food that lays scattered across the floor.

Why had he done that?

Vengeance? What good did vengeance do? He was no closer to finding Tommy than he had been before he had ripped that alien's arm off.

Sam curls into himself.

What is *wrong* with him?

He tries to wipe his face and succeeds in nothing but smearing the alien's blood across his cheek. He gags at the smell so close to his nose, and the rising in his stomach alerts him that it will not be satisfied with dry heaving.

He scrambles over to the corner, falling over himself in an effort not to vomit on his cot, the one place he's mildly comfortable in. He braces himself against the wall, leaving bloody handprints streaking down the metal.

He heaves again, feeling his stomach cramp painfully. He feels acid in the back of his throat and coughs violently as it comes up, the bitter taste making him only retch harder. He curls in on himself as he vomits again and again. He keeps dry heaving even when there's nothing left in his stomach, and he *knows* there isn't because he hasn't eaten since he'd been taken, Mask's offerings having been violently rejected. He feels another stab of guilt at that. Or maybe it's just the stomach cramps.

Once his body has settled as much as it could, he drags himself over to the cot and collapses onto it. He wants to cry, but he won't. He can't waste the water. God knows he probably won't get anything to eat or drink in a long while thanks to the stunt he had just pulled.

And on maybe the only person in all of space who could help him get back to Tommy.

Sam lays on his cot and shakes apart, scratching at the skin on his arms and picking at his fingernails.

He does not cry.

Time passes in a haze after that. Food is delivered, but no one comes in now. The door opens, the food is set down, and then it shuts again just as quickly. Sam doesn't blame them. He doesn't try to escape either. He hasn't eaten anything they've given him. He's sure it's laced with something, and even if it's not, he'd just throw it all up anyway.

So he leaves the food to rot on the floor of his cell. It doesn't matter. He'll be dead soon anyway. There's no way they aren't going to kill him for trying to kill Mask- for taking off its arm.

It's been- what? Three days? Sam has no idea if the English-speaking alien even *survived* Sam's attack. He could have very well killed his only chance of communicating, of getting back to Tommy. He hates himself more than he ever had before, and that coupled with the dread of his impending doom, it doesn't make for a stable mind.

Even with the assuredness of his own death looming, he finds himself riddled with curiosity. Mask had *spoken* . In *English* . Sam had theorized that perhaps they were human under that mask, but the idea was quickly discarded. Their hands and tail were clearly alien, not to mention the slowly drying blood that was now pooling around the room that was decidedly not the familiar smell of human blood.

He sits in the pile of blankets for a long time after the aliens leave. He doesn't try to pull the fabric over him, even though he's getting goosebumps and is uncomfortably cold. He doesn't deserve to be comfortable right now. Not after the mistake he'd made. It doesn't matter how much stress he's under, he needs to be a human. He needs to act like a human. He can't become the animal they saw him as. The animal they tried to reduce him to. He won't allow it.

His self-imposed punishment- letting himself shiver as he sat underneath the air vent, ends when he hears a quiet rapping on the door. He slinks over to it, careful to keep his footsteps silent, just in case.

"Hello," Comes a whispered voice from behind the door, rough and heavily accented, nearly startling Sam into falling off the cot. Mask is alive, and somehow willing to come back. "Can hear me?"

Sam hesitates. Does he really want to answer? Right now they think he's an animal, but if they know he's sapient, his punishment for trying to kill Mask could be much, *much* worse.

But every second that he sits uselessly in this cell is a second that he's not getting back to Tommy.

"Yes," He whispers through the door. The voice is silent for several seconds before speaking something in Alien, sounding excited.

"Are human?" They ask.

"I- yeah. Yes. Human." He tries to keep his sentences as simple as possible, as Sam would bet his bottom dollar that English is not this alien's first language. They mutter something to themselves again, before speaking to Sam.

"Why attack?" They ask, and Sam winces.

"I- I am so afraid," Sam says quietly. "I am so, so afraid. I'm sorry."

"Forgive you." The alien says. If they mean it, Sam is amazed at their capacity for forgiveness, as Sam *had* ripped their arm off three days ago. "Your name?"

"Sam," Sam answers quietly. "Yours?"

"Ponk," The alien says, and Sam somehow feels even worse about mauling them now that he knows their name. All that goes out the window, however, when Sam realizes that this is his chance to pass along a message.

"Wait, please, tell- tell the others that-"

"Slow," Ponk interrupts. "Can't understand fast talk."

"My kid, he's on the other ship," Sam says, drawing out the words even when the impatience stings like glass in his stomach.

"Kid?" Ponk repeats, like the word is foreign in his mouth.

"My son," Sam tries. "Ward, cellmate. Whatever, he needs help!"

"Your son?" Ponk asks, still not understanding. Sam snarls in frustration, and he can hear fabric shifting as the alien- as *Ponk* moves away from the door.

"Sorry, sorry," Sam says. He *needs* Ponk not to abandon him right now, they might be Sam's only chance of getting back to Tommy.

"I don't understand," Ponk says, sounding anxious.

"I know- I *know* you don't understand," Sam says, trying to keep his voice even and calm.

"Tell..." Sam makes a gesture to represent Eyes' horns, but it is lost through the barrier of the door and Sam sighs. This would be a lot easier face to face. "Tell friends I am not hurting anyone anymore." Sam tries.

"You don't hurt now?"

"Yes." Sam agrees. "Tell them help me, I need help."

"I try," Ponk says hesitantly. "They think human animal. Think Ponk-" They say a word in alien that Sam can't follow. "Stupid." They continue.

“Not stupid,” Sam says firmly. “Foolish, maybe, coming back after what I did. Not stupid, though.”

Ponk doesn't seem to follow most of the sentence, but Sam hopes they caught the important parts.

“I try,” Ponk repeats, and Sam hears the sound of someone standing, the shifting of fabric on fabric. “They find me soon, not to come back here so soon.”

“See you later,” Sam says. It’s a prayer.

“Goodbye,” Ponk says in a way that speaks of repeated practice.

This might be his one way of getting out of here, and he prays to God that Ponk’s crew believes them. That they care enough to listen to their crewmate, that they care enough to help Sam.

It’s a long shot, but honestly...

Sam is afraid of what he might do if they don't.

Reaching Out

Chapter Summary

A bit shorter than i wanted it to be but oh well.
A chiller chapter, no warnings.

Waiting is the hard part.

That's what Sam decides as he sits in his blood-sodden cell, taking deep, even breaths to keep himself calm.

This alien- Ponk, may be his only chance to get back to Tommy, and he has no idea if he can trust them. Hell, he *shouldn't* trust them. He had ripped off their arm less than a week ago, if it had been the other way around- if it had been *Sam* brutalized by an alien he would rather die than help them.

But they came back, and their voice was soft behind the door. They offered to help.

Sam is so, *so* desperate for softness out here.

So he caved, and- against his better judgment, he decided to trust the alien.

Now waiting is all that he can do. He's unable to sleep, to even close his eyes, paranoid that he will miss the alien's attempt at connection. His out. He sits cross-legged on his cot and sways in place, breathing in the sickly-sweet, slowly-rotting smell of Ponk's blood. He tries not to think, because all his thoughts wander back to the last ship. Back to Tommy. Every other human had been taken, so what are the chances that even if Sam *does* find his way back Tommy will still be there? The likelihood is astronomically small. But shit, so was the chance of being abducted by aliens.

Sam pushes past the thick muck of terror and preemptive grief and decides to cling to the tiny bright speck of hope that's left within him.

Ponk returns the next day.

"Hello," Comes the voice behind the door. Sam immediately scrambles to his feet, tripping over himself to get to the alien that waits behind the door.

"Hello," Sam replies, fingers shaking where they press against the metal of the door. "Did you ask for help?"

"Do not believe me," Ponk says, something hard and bitter in their voice. "Think you hurt my head."

"You're kidding," Sam whispers, indignant on Ponk's behalf. Ponk doesn't respond. Sam hadn't expected them to.

They sit in silence for a few seconds. Sam listens to his heart race. He doesn't know what to do, his only potential out has hit a roadblock. If their crew doesn't believe them- would sooner believe that they have *brain damage* than trust their word, then there is no guarantee that Ponk will *actually* be able to help him.

"We not hurt you," Ponk says quietly. "Not last ship."

"I don't care," Sam says, laying his head over his folded arms. "I left someone behind."

"Someone?" Ponk asks.

"Like. A person." Sam tries to explain. "A human."

"You?"

"No , not-" Sam takes a deep breath, feeling himself start to get frustrated. He can't blow this chance. "No. Another human."

"More human on ship?" Ponk asks, speaking more quickly, accent getting stronger.

"Just- teach me alien!" Sam snaps. "Teach me alien so I can tell your leader that you left my kid behind!"

There is silence, and Sam wilts. There's no way this is going to work.

"ᐱᓂᕈᖅ." Ponk says. "Language is ᐱᓂᕈᖅ."

"...𐌸𐌹𐍂𐌰𐌶𐌰𐌹𐍃." Sam tries.

"𐌲𐌿𐌱𐌰," Ponk stresses.

"𐀀𐀃𐀆𐀆𐀆?" Sam tries again.

"||J== ¬J:: | 7!" Ponk cheers. "Uh- good job!"

Sam cracks a smile.

"Thank you."

"T T J U + || J =," Ponk translates.

They sit like that for what feels like hours, just repeating words back and forth until Sam can pronounce very basic greetings. Ponk cheers every time Sam succeeds, and it almost leaves Sam feeling better.

Almost. He won't be feeling better until he gets to Tommy and makes sure he's okay.

Ponk has to leave eventually, at risk of his captain finding him and forcing him away from Sam, potentially for good. Sam lets him go, worrying his lip at the prospect of their little parleys being cut to an abrupt end. He voices this to Ponk.

(Afraid,) He tries in Common. His accent is atrocious, probably, but for the first human (presumably) to ever speak it, he thinks he's doing pretty good. *(Captain find...um, me, you. Hurt, take.)*

(He won't,) Ponk assures him. *(I'm sneaky.)*

Sam isn't too sure, but he can't stop him from leaving.

The lack of company, of a warm body behind the door, stings like nettles in his chest. He doesn't want to be alone. The thought of this system being permanent, hell of going on for a few more *days* leaves him dizzy and nauseous

The idea of eternity always made him anxious, but the thought that- especially on the last ship when hope was something no one held, the idea that there would never be an escape was haunting and very real. Of course, there was no obvious out, but taking things day by day, and hoping you would die sooner rather than grow old dressed in the last tattered clothes you wore on Earth was a balm on the wound.

There was always someone, though. He was never alone.

Tommy wasn't either, until now, and the thought makes him shudder. The worst part of going out for testing wasn't the needles or the pain or the hot feverish flush that tormented him even days after he went back to the cages. The worst part was being alone, not a familiar face anywhere.

Not even a *human* face anywhere.

Now he's not getting experimented on, they aren't taking the right precautions, and they haven't even tried to *touch* him and somehow he still wishes he was back at the other ship. At least then, when he was alone he knew he would go back to the cages. With the humming and the hair-braiding and the whispered stories about lives they'd all left behind.

Now there is nothing.

The lessons continue.

Sam tries to get Ponk to teach him various specific words, but without being able to act them out, if Ponk doesn't know the word in English, or the words that make up the description of it, it's a lost cause.

(ʒʃκ has the only key,) Ponk grumbles when Sam asks why he doesn't just break him out of here. ʒʃκ is apparently the name of his captain, the one Sam had been calling Eyes, which translates to 'Bad'. The other crew members all, of course, have names as well, with the goatlike one being 'Captain Puffy' which according to Ponk does *not* mean she is the captain, it's just her first name. The blue crystal golem thing is named 'Skeppy', and the cat, which is apparently not just a cat and a valuable and revered member of the crew, is named 'Antfrost'.

Those are all just approximate translations of course, but it's the closest Sam is going to get.

Ponk keeps trying to tell the crew. He reports back to Sam each time they turn him away, more frustrated every time he approaches the door.

(They don't listen!) Ponk grumbles. Sam nods his head even though he can't see him and throws a wrapper across the room, rubbing his tongue across his teeth. He shouldn't be surprised that his teeth are killing him when he hasn't been able to brush them in upwards of three months, but it's still an incredible annoyance. *(Every time I bring it up, it's all oh Ponk, are you feeling alright? Ponk we know you've been reading those human romance stories again. UGH.)*

Sam didn't understand most of what Ponk said, but he hums in agreement anyway. Before Ponk can continue his rant about... whatever it is he's talking about, Sam butts in with the idea he's been formulating for the past few hours.

(I have idea,) Sam says. *(For getting out.)* Ponk pauses.

(Not hurting anyone?) He asks apprehensively.

(No more hurting,) Sam agrees.

(But I'm going to need you to teach me a few new words.)

Sam crouches by the door, shifting slightly. He's been in this position for so long that his calves are starting to cramp terribly, but it's all worth it. It has to be.

There is the sound of hoofbeats, and Sam's heart beats faster, anticipation showing in the tenseness of his jaw, the trembling of his body as he prepares for what might be his only chance to escape.

The door cracks open, and Sam holds his breath.

The captain- Bad, freezes when he sees the empty room. Sam can only hope he falls for the same trick twice.

The alien peeks behind the door to see Sam crouching there, covering his mouth to muffle his breathing. The captain makes a noise of alarm, and before he is able to overcome his shock, Sam grabs his wrist and yanks him inside the room with all his strength.

The alien tumbles forward, overbalanced, and falls into the room. Before he is able to right himself Sam has kicked the door shut and positioned himself in front of it, shoulders raised, hands curled into claws.

Bad stands too, and it is a terrifying thing to behold. Sam shakes his head to clear it of the fear. Bad is not an animal, and if Ponk is to be believed, he can be reasoned with.

(Listen,) He says, and though he's sure his Common is so accented it's barely comprehensible, the captain freezes, blinking his wide, emotionless eyes. *(Human not animal. Lost, took me away.)*

(You- I-) Bad stammers, and Sam nearly laughs at how soft his voice is. He had been expecting a demonic growl. *(We- we took you from a bad place.)*

(No. Took me from my kid.)

Bad twitches back. They both fall silent.

(Kid on bad ship, scared, alone, miss him.) Sam tries, praying that Bad understands.

(You- we didn't-) Bad rasps, breath rattling in his chest.

(Lost, scared, alone!) Sam shouts, frustrated with the lack of progress. *(Help me!)*

Bad steps back, hands coming up to cover his eyes.

(Oh my goodness...) He breathes.

"God- there's no time for self-pity!" Sam snaps. *(Let me out! Find my kid! Lost!)*

Bad yanks his arm out of Sam's grip and bolts out of the room. Sam snarls in rage, until he sees the door left open.

He steps out of the storage room and sways on his feet.

What now?

He settles on the only thing he can think to do, he walks down the hall, not bothering to muffle his footsteps like he had before. If he's gained the captain's sympathy then there's no need to hide anymore. If he hasn't then he'll do what he has to.

He drags his fingertips along the wall, listening to the scraping of his bitten-down nails against the metal. He had read once, in a readers digest in his dentists waiting room, that if you kept your hand on the wall of a maze you could never get lost. He hopes that same principle holds true for slapdash spaceships careening through deep space at unimaginable speeds.

He stops at a door, left open. Inside the room, smaller than Sam's cell, barely larger than a broom closet, the captain is curled, grinding his forehead into the wall and muttering.

Sam doesn't speak. What could he say? Offer comforts? Sam still can't forgive him, can't even say he doesn't hate him.

So he sits down, his back against the wall.

(I'm sorry.) Bad whispers. *(I'm so, so sorry.)*

Sam opens his mouth to accept it, to do the polite thing he was raised doing, and then shuts it again. He won't lie. Not about this.

(Fix it,) Sam says instead. *(Save kid. Then I forgive.)*

Bad raises his head weakly.

(I don't know how-)

(You learn how.) Sam says firmly. He will not take no for an answer. *(You broke this, fix it now.)*

(You're right,) Bad whispers, and though Sam doesn't quite understand the words he understands an acquisition when he hears it.

(You help?) Sam asks, allowing a sliver of hope to creep into his voice.

(Yes human,) Bad says, stepping out of the closet and drawing to his full, terrifying height. *(I help.)*

Before Sam can say anything else Ponk comes skidding around the corner, nearly toppling over before he catches himself with his remaining arm, and Sam does cringe a bit at the tied off stump that remains of his left arm, and sprints towards the two of them.

(Did- oh, oh okay. Well this is either very good or very bad.) Ponk stutters, not quite making eye contact with his captain.

(The human told me everything.) Bad says firmly. Most of the conversation is going over Sam's head, but if it's for his or Tommy's benefit then he's willing to let it go on for as long as it must. *(We will be delaying any current jobs to devote our energy into tracking down Dream's ship.)*

Ponk nods eagerly and Sam stands from where he sat against the wall. He may not understand the words but he hears an order.

(And... Ponk, I'm sorry.) Bad says, baring his throat to Ponk in what must be some sort of submissive display. *(For not listening. I acted... closemindedly, and I know you're smart. I should have listened.)*

(Yeah,) Ponk sighs. *(You should have, but I forgive you buddy.)*

There is a moment of tender silence before Sam clears his throat. He doesn't have the words for it but he gives the two aliens a look that he hopes conveys something along the lines of 'can we hurry this along please?'. They probably don't get it, what with the differing body language and all, but Bad seems to get the message, startling a bit.

(Right, Ponk, go alert the rest of the crew. We've got a human to track down.)

For the first time in a while, Sam smiles.

He's gonna find his kid.

Changes Pt.I

Chapter Summary

gets experimented on.... like a boss

Alien pirates- and it turns out that these people- aliens? No, people. These *people* he's stuck with are pirates, which is as hilarious as it is confusing. Sam guesses it makes sense, where there are ships there are pirates, after all. Even if those ships are not water-bound and instead sail around looting other spaceships.

Anyway , the alien pirates took the news that he was sentient surprisingly well, though there were still some pretty obvious tensions.

The first few days out of his holding cell/storage room were... tense, to say the least. At least one of them would flinch every time he moved, and he *did* make Bad shriek in terror when he had stood behind the captain for several seconds before alerting the alien to his presence.

But it has been seven days, a whole week, since he got out, and things have calmed down.

They aren't any closer to finding Tommy, but they have a plan now, which is an immense weight off of Sam's shoulders.

He's getting better at communicating. He's still not fluent, not by a long shot, but he can usually understand most of the words the aliens say, if not speak it as well.

So for the most part he keeps to himself and throws himself into finding Tommy.

The last ship, apparently owned by a poacher named Dream, was able to be tracked, but it was proving difficult, and they weren't making much progress. Sam can't think about anything but finding the kid, and his health is suffering for it. He rubs his tongue over his teeth, his toothache had progressed from a mild annoyance to something genuinely painful, making him wince every time he tried to eat anything more solid than a purree.

This concerned the aliens, on the rare occasion that he ate with them, but he waved them off. He is not going to stop the search for something as inconsequential as a *toothache* .

So to review, he's been eating less, sleeping less, and is in constant pain. It doesn't make for a happy camper, but Sam can focus on his personal health when Tommy is back at his side.

The aliens already don't like him. Maybe. He thinks. It's kind of hard to tell when their body language is so vastly different from humans.

He's been waking up screaming. He muffles it almost immediately every time, but he's sure the crew hears it. It rings in his own ears, the volume deafening. It's nightmares, though rarely anything of substance, flashes of darkness, of blood and overhead lights that shine in his eyes. The feeling of drug-induced weakness gluing him to the floor, where he is unable to run, unable to chase after his captors as they drag Tommy away kicking and screaming.

Tonight, he had woken up and tasted blood.

He had panicked, of course. Blood randomly filling your mouth as you sleep is generally considered to be an issue. Maybe it's different out in space, but Sam isn't going to take any chances.

He jogs to the bathroom, cupping a hand under his chin so he doesn't drip blood and drool all over the bathroom floor. The blood is sticky and warm where it spills into the curve of his hand, and he shudders at the feeling, pushing open the bathroom door with his free, clean hand.

He spits the blood into the sink, which is more like a washbasin you would find in a craft studio than a bathroom sink, and washes his hands clean of the blood with the weird, waxy soap that's supposed to smell like some kind of fruit Sam has never heard of.

With his mouth still pooling with blood, Sam bares his teeth at the mirror, frowning at how much blood there is. He pokes his sore teeth, and his stomach drops when one shifts.

Shit.

He should have known this would happen without any dental facilities. *God*, what if he gets gingivitis. Oh God, what if it gets *infected*? Do they have antibiotics in space? Probably not. Sam, against his better judgment, pokes the tooth again, and swears under his breath when it falls out without any further prodding. He scrambles to catch it and sets it on the counter. He'll clean it up later. Right now he has to figure out how he's going to be able to eat meat missing a canine tooth. He slides his tongue over his teeth and feels the other one wiggle.

Two canine teeth.

He bows his head over the sink with a sigh and grabs it between his fingers. Better sooner than later, he supposes. He doesn't want it to *actually* rot out of his head. Or would it be better to wait?

Well, Sam doesn't know and he has no way to find out.

He yanks out the tooth with a muffled cry.

He stares at the two canine teeth now sitting side by side on the counter.

"What the heck," He murmurs. "What are the chances?"

Are canine teeth more likely to rot out than other teeth or something? That could be an explanation. Sam grimaces into the mirror, showing his teeth, face pulling back in disgust at

the two gaps that now sit where his canine teeth once were. He rubs a hand over his face, exhausted.

At least his teeth don't hurt anymore, he reasons, running his tongue over his teeth again, relieved to find no pain from the pressure.

He sticks his tongue into the gap between his teeth and frowns.

There is something sharp there.

Had it broken? Was a shard of the tooth wedged in his gum? He examines the teeth he'd taken out to see them completely intact. He sticks his tongue in the other gap to find the same sharp protrusion.

Are they... growing back?

It doesn't make any sense. Sam knows that he had already lost his baby teeth. It would be pretty obvious if he still had them. He pokes at the new growth, frowning in confusion.

He looks down at the blood that stains the counter and sighs. He should probably clean that up before he worries about anything else. According to the rest of the ship, human blood can be highly poisonous to a lot of other species, and he would hate to kill one of them accidentally when he couldn't even kill one on purpose. He picks up the two teeth and rolls them in the cup of his hand like dice, chuckling a little despite the absurdness of the situation. God, an adult man in space losing his teeth. This is a terrible setup to a terrible joke.

He drops the teeth into his front pocket and starts cleaning up the blood with a wet cloth. Thankfully, cloth seems to be fairly universal, even if clothes aren't.

Once the counter is clean again and Sam doesn't have to worry about any of the crew accidentally coming in contact with his blood, he walks back to the room and collapses onto his bed. Or, actually, the bed he's been borrowing for the time being. He doesn't know if he's going to stay once he finds Tommy, but for now, he's just calling himself a guest.

He's tired down to his *bones*, but he isn't eager to fall asleep, not with the nightmares that chase him down. He rolls onto his back and puts his hands over his eyes, eager to block out the faint light from beyond the door. His head hurts. His mouth still tastes like blood. He should have thought to wash it out while he was in the bathroom, but he hadn't and like heck is he going to get back up now.

He lays still until morning. He doesn't sleep, but he lays on his back with his eyes closed, and that's better than nothing. The Mythbusters proved that.

When he wakes up things are not better.

It wasn't a dream, his teeth really were gone, though the blood had dried up sometime in his sleep. He tries not to open his mouth when he's around the others, covering his mouth with his hand most of the time that he passed them. He's sure they're noticing, but they don't say

anything. Probably writing it off as one of those weird human things they're all trying to get used to.

"Plan today?" Sam asks in common, coming up behind Bad and making him startle.

"Oh! Human, hi! Uh, yes, since Dream is a pocher, any sightings of his ship will be in the council's logs. So... were breaking into them!"

"Oh," Sam says.

"Yeah," Bad responds. Sam shifts his weight, cringing at the awkwardness. The limited amount of words Sam knows in Common has created a barrier between him and the crew, and Sam can't *wait* to find Tommy and get the hell out of here.

He leaves the crew to their search and heads back to the bathroom to get a better look at his teeth now that there is enough light to see them.

The blood has mostly been licked away, but the spaces between his teeth are still reddened slightly. He's not going to be able to fix that without a toothbrush, and God knows where he'd find that in space. Sam sighs and rakes his fingers through his hair. It's greasy. He can't figure out if any of the cleaning products are safe for humans, and he's not willing to risk it. He frowns, seeing a flash of vivid green near his roots and combs through his hair again. If there are *plants* growing in his hair he is going to *freak*.

He stares at his reflection for a few seconds, trying to parse what he is seeing.

It's not plants, at least. His hair looks like it's *growing in* green.

"What?" He whispers, leaning closer to the mirror. The mirror offers no response. Of course. He tugs at his hair, even though he knows it's not going to do anything to help him. It pulls at his scalp. Yup. Definitely his hair.

He slams the bathroom door open, ignoring the startled yelp that Ponk lets out, and rushes back to his room- or, the room that he's been sleeping in. He grabs... something. It could be a very small blanket, and ties it over his head like a scarf, pressing his hands over his ears to block out how loud and terrifying everything feels.

"What is happening?" He asks himself, hands trembling. There is a knock on the door, and Ponk's voice is behind it.

"Uh... Sam? Are you okay?" He asks in English.

"I'm fine," Sam says on instinct, pulling his hands away from his head. He doesn't have *time* for this, he can focus on all this... *weirdness* when Tommy is safe. For now, he can ignore this. It's *fine*. He opens the door.

"Good hat." Ponk says, and Sam is still learning, but he could swear that Ponk sounds slightly amused.

"Thanks," Sam says in Common, pulling the cloth off and letting it fall to the ground. "Any progress with the hacking?"

"Hacking?"

"Computer break-in."

"Ah, yes. Sort of, the last report we've found was months ago, we think they were doing a deep space trip."

"How many months?"

"Five," Ponk says, frowning underneath his mask.

"Then that'll be right around when they took us," Sam says with a sigh.

"We'll keep looking," Ponk says.

"I know... I just- I wish i could do anything to help. I don't know how to read your language, I barely know how to speak it!"

"You're helping," Ponk reassures. "In your own way, you are. You told us that Tommy was back there and now we know who's ship he was on from your descriptions."

Sam doesn't say anything. He doesn't agree, and he doesn't want to be comforted. He just wants this to be done.

"Sure," He says instead. That will have to be good enough for now.

The day goes on and no one mentions his missing teeth or his weird green roots, they just search for Tommy and work on the upkeep of the ship. This works out fine for Sam, the last thing any of them need is a distraction from their goal. They don't have that kind of time. *Tommy* doesn't have that kind of time, not when almost everyone had already been taken away to who-knows-where or killed or *whatever*.

When night falls Sam doesn't go to look at himself in the mirror as he had been doing every free second, as though his features were just magically going to right themselves into his normal, human qualities. It's not a zero chance, they had managed to appear as if by magic, after all.

He's exhausted. He's been so stressed all day and he needs rest if he's going to keep working tomorrow. Thankfully, or perhaps not depending on how you look at it, none of the crewmembers are nocturnal, which means that they all get to work at the same times, but it also means that they aren't able to maintain a twenty-four-hour work cycle, or whatever the equivalent of a twenty-four-hour cycle would be out here.

But he needs rest, even if he feels so incredibly guilty for lying in a soft bed with huge fluffy pillows while Tommy probably is sleeping in a cold, barren cell, he can't work if he's bone

tired. He knows that. He's not stupid.

He falls asleep as soon as he lays down.

It's a little funny. When he had been on Earth it had been so *difficult* to fall asleep, he had always needed some form of sleep aid. Music or rain sounds or melatonin, now? He's lucky to have a bed.

When he wakes up, he feels like his whole body is on fire.

He curls into himself as soon as he is aware of the pain, his breath getting caught in his throat. He feels *awful*, not even like he's sick. He feels like his skin is numb and too tight and his joints hurt terribly, his ears hurt *terribly*. Everything does. What is happening? Why is this *happening*?

"Morning Sam!" Ponk says past the door. He had been delighted to learn different human greetings, not just the formal English taught in space, and had been using them to wake Sam up almost every day.

"Morning," Sam says, trying not to let the pain creep into his voice.

"You ready for another day?" Ponk asks, and Sam knows he's just trying to hype Sam up, but the sentiment chafes against the soft parts of Sam's mind. He wants to snap, to scream, to tear apart everything in the room.

"Always," He says instead, getting out of the bed and almost collapsing under the weight of his own body, the pressure on his knees almost unbearable. He holds onto the wall for support, but it does little to help him.

"I'll meet you at breakfast," Ponk says, his cheerfulness grating, and Sam makes a noise of affirmation that he hopes doesn't sound too strained before he hears Ponk's claws clicking on the hallway floors in the direction of the kitchen.

Sam takes another step and yelps as his legs collapse out from underneath him, sending him sprawling across the floor.

He is *so* screwed.

Changes Pt.2 (For Everything)

Chapter Summary

cw

//panic attacks

//nonsexual nudity

For obvious reasons, Sam does not join them for breakfast.

Ponk's concerns over his fall were waved away, and he was good enough at keeping the pain out of his voice that his friend- ally? didn't notice it. Either that or Ponk doesn't know what a pained human sounds like. Probably the second one.

Once the coast is clear he drags himself to the bathroom and rips his clothes off of himself. The fabric is touching him all *wrong* and it feels like it's suffocating him and he doesn't know what to do.

His breath is coming in panicked wheezes and he is looking at his face but it looks wrong. It all feels wrong. It's all *wrong* and it isn't ever going to be right again. He throws his coverall across the room, watches it hit the wall and slide down to the floor. It doesn't make him feel better. There is no satisfaction. He turns, panting, to the mirror.

He looks like a wild animal.

Sweating, disheveled, half-naked.

There is the very beginning of sharp teeth poking from his gums, just barely visible beyond his curled lip. The sight makes him rear back, slapping a hand over his mouth to cover this... this terrifying development. He puts his elbows on the counter and covers his face- covers the warped thing his face has become. An unfamiliar man in an unfamiliar mirror.

"This isn't right," He whispers into his sweating hands. It isn't. He feels more lost than he ever has before. Lost and alone and confused.

He lifts his head from where he had been hiding behind his palms and glances at the mirror, eyes screwed up.

His ears look wrong, that's the next thing he notices. They're longer, almost tapered where the round shell of his cartilage had been. His eyes are... brighter, not with fever and *certainly* not with joy, the color is literally becoming lighter. His hair is still turning green, his teeth are still coming in sharp and strange.

He watches himself for a while, warily, like one may watch a black bear rooting through their garbage. Too afraid to get closer, too afraid to move back.

"What... is this?" Sam whispers, tugging at a lock of his hair. He racks his mind, trying to think of side effects to space travel that he's heard of. Fainting spells, loss of bone density, stress, nothing like *this*. Not turning into a *monster*. This is unheard of, this is *alien*.

Sam freezes, eyes catching on his chapped lips, on his once-broken nose.

The experiments.

His hands start to tremble as they slowly move up to wind into his hair, a small attempt at grounding himself in this vast empty terror becoming an absolute must.

"No," He whispers, eyes blown out. Scared. Shocky, like a dead animal on the side of the road. "No. God, God, God, no. No."

He stumbles back from his reflection, back and back until he can see his whole ruined body, skinny where he once was strong, pale where he once was tan, gnashing yellow teeth where he could have been smiling. He looks pathetic, in nothing but his stained yellowed undershirt and boxers, the clothes he'd been wearing under his coverall since he got here. He feels disgusting. His body is *wrong*.

He lunges for the shower and stares desperately at the controls. It makes no sense to him, but there is a lever, so he pulls it.

Freezing water immediately begins to spray, making Sam yelp and spring back. He taps at the screen beside the shower, pressing random buttons until he can feel steam rise from the jet of water. He lets out some rattly sound, something that might have been a laugh but sounded more like a sob, and steps into the water, not bothering to check the heat, not even bothering to strip the rest of the way.

It is, of course, way too hot, but it doesn't matter. It's a hot shower, he can handle his skin going red. He tilts his head back, letting the water run over his hair, washing away the caked sweat and grime.

He starts to sob, though no tears come out. Or, if they do, Sam can't differentiate between them and the hot water. His teeth stay locked together, his eyes stay closed, but his shoulders shake. When his mouth opens, he is sobbing out loud, and he can only hope that the sound of the running water covers it. He tries to sit down, but it's more like he's falling, though he doesn't feel the pain. He curls into himself, clenching his fists so tightly that his nails start to dig into his palm, bitten down as they are.

"I can't do this," He sobs, breathy enough that the others won't hear, even if they are listening. "I can't do this, I can't do this alone. Please, please God someone help me."

He sits there for a while, under the spray of the near-boiling water, sobbing out prayers or pleas or- whatever this counts as. Some sort of desperate act from someone who doesn't deserve it. Add him to the club.

The tears don't ever come, but when he's managed to stop his shoulders from shaking and his teeth from clenching so hard it gives him a headache he strips his underclothes off and finds what he assumes to be soap. He doesn't stand. He doesn't trust his legs to hold him up right now, with how much pain he's in.

He washes himself first, scrubbing with his hands, scraping himself with his nails in some desperate attempt to exfoliate, he washes his hair and stares and the blood and dirt that swirls down the drain.

He washes his clothes next, soaking them in soap and hot water, softening the places where the fabric had gone stiff with sweat until they are soft and smell like something unfamiliar, but at least more pleasant than three months of sweat, vomit, and blood. He sighs, staring at his now sort of clean clothes. He snuffles, wipes away the water that runs into his eyes and stands up.

He turns off the water and stands naked in the strange chamber that makes up the ship's shower, skin prickling from the residual heat of the water. He stares at the door, not really thinking. He feels numb. Despite his concerning lack of tears, it seems that he's cried himself out.

He starts to search for a towel, but it doesn't seem like that is a luxury that space possesses, so he just ends up dripping water all over the floor while he digs through whatever cupboards and hidey-holes he can find. Which are a lot of them. He'll have to clean that up before someone slips, although how he's going to do that without a towel is another problem. He sighs, running his fingers through his hair as he thinks, and almost cracks a smile at the feeling of it being clean. It slips away just as quickly when all the other horrible things that are going on rise to the surface.

Oh well. He dries himself off as best he can with his coverall once he had picked it up from its heap on the floor. He'll clean that another day, it's less urgent since it wasn't actually touching most of him. He doesn't bother with his clothes, just wrings them out and puts them on before pulling his coverall over it. His wet clothes soak through what little was dry of his coverall in an instant, and he could get a cold. There's no way his immune system isn't shot to hell after so long being malnourished but- or, can you get a cold in space? There are no humans to give it to him, after all.

The thought sends another little sting of grief through him, and he clenches his teeth, trying to move past it.

He should join the others. He should join the search for Tommy. He should do a lot of things.

He stands up and opens the bathroom door.

When he leaves, Ponk is standing at the end of the hallway, staring at him. Sam can't read his expressions. He probably won't ever be able to.

"You're soaked." He says.

"Yeah," Sam says, voice hoarse. "I took a shower."

"That's good," Ponk says, adjusting the box he's holding. "You need a towel?"

"No," Sam says, brushing past the alien. "The bathroom floor is wet, though. Be careful."

Spending the day on his feet was a poor idea, but the guilt of spending a whole day not contributing to the search would hurt worse than the strain he's putting on his joints.

He's in the control room now, standing alongside the group of aliens. They move in sync, they walk around each other in the cramped ship in a way that- hilariously, reminds Sam of his brief stint as a line cook, the constant pushing past each other, the weaving in between bodies, the shouts of 'behind you!'. They work as a team, they know each other, and though Sam knows nothing of the group's history, he can see that they have all known each other for a long time, and are a family. As close as you can get.

Sam... is there too.

It's uncomfortable, third-wheeling- or, would it be sixth-wheeling? the rest of the team. To barely even understand their language while they seem to be able to bare their souls to each other at a glance.

It doesn't matter. This is temporary. As soon as he finds Tommy, they're out of here.

That's what he keeps telling himself, when the ache of seeing them so familiar with each other crops up. He is a guest. An unwilling guest- okay. He's been kidnapped and now he's a guest. It's confusing, but either way, he doesn't fit in. At all.

He's standing beside the Captain- who has insisted that Sam call him Bad because apparently it gets confusing with Puffy's first name being Captain. Also, he's meant to call her by her last name. Whatever, alien naming conventions are weird, he got it. Moving on. So, he is standing next to Bad, watching him work on his strange, unintelligible space computer. Sam watches intently. He understands none of what's happening, but he feels like if he sees the signal for Dream's ship he'll know somehow. It's stupid, and definitely not how that works, but he still stands and watches when he can't help with anything else. Which is often. There is very little he can do to help without being able to read their language or use their technology. All he's done is provide them information on Dream's ship, which- while useful, he only knows so much of, so once that well had dried up, so had his usefulness in the hunt.

His knees are wobbling. He doesn't have a chair, so he's been leaning on the table, but that hurts too, with his wrists aching at holding up his weight. He doesn't know why his joints in his body are choosing this moment to rebel, but he has to assume it's due to his terrible, unnaturally shifting body. Due to the aliens and their godless experiments.

All he knows is that he's hurting, and his knees are shaking.

"Are you feeling okay?" Bad asks suddenly, tail flicking. It brushes against the back of Sam's leg, making him shudder. Sam nods.

"Yeah, just worried." He says. He isn't lying, he *is* worried. He has been since he's been taken from Dream's ship. Hell, he's been worried since he got to space. Bad hums and turns back to the computer.

As Sam sits and waits for... whatever Bad is doing to be done he can feel the pain spreading to his ribs, his fingers, his skull. Something is so horrendously wrong and there is nothing he can do.

'Tell the crew', says the voice in his head, the overly trusting and optimistic voice that should have died when he was taken from Earth but didn't.

What could they do? Reverse the torture he'd been through? Take out the serums and powders that had been forced into his system, stop the nightmares that haunted his nights and made him even *more* useless than he already is?

They could do none of that, and then even *trying* would be a distraction from finding Tommy.

No. Until they find his kid, he's handling this on his own. They aren't his friends. At the end of the day, they kidnapped him. They took him away from Tommy, and even if it was an accident, even if they didn't know what they were doing, they took him away from Tommy, and now he doesn't even know if he's *alive* -

"Sam, deep breath," Ponk says in English, and the familiarity of the language snaps him out of his thoughts long enough to realize that his breathing had turned strained and loud, that his hands were at his side, his eyes frozen open. Unblinking. Afraid. Shocky, like roadkill.

"I'm not an animal," He hisses, hands coming up to clutch his face. He doesn't know if he's saying it to remind him or Ponk.

"I know," Ponk is saying, but his hands are up, like he's comforting some wild thing and Sam *is* a wild thing and nothing is right and he's turning into something wild and awful and what if he loses himself and what if he loses Tommy-

"Sam, come on, let's get out of here." Ponk is saying, but Sam can't see, he can't *do* this. Ponk is tugging his sleeve and he's still soaking wet and he still feels filthy and wrong and inhuman even where the water had washed away all the dirt.

"I can't do this," He whispers, sinking to the ground, face in his hands. He's aware of the eyes on him, the rest of the crew no doubt called in by Bad. Probably to restrain him if he went wild again. "I'm not strong enough."

"You can," Ponk says firmly, crouching at his side. "He's going to be okay."

Sam shakes his head, hands squeezing his temples, like he can somehow stop his brain from destroying itself by pure force of will.

"No, no, no nothing is *right* ," Sam chokes out. "I'm so afraid, I miss my home, I miss my *life* . I miss my *kid!*" On the last word, Sam throws his head back, and- ah, there are the tears that were missing earlier. He's blubbering like a child, and through his blurry vision, he can see Bad backing up. He wants to cuss him out, he wants to say he hates him, and he *does* , but... Bad is helping. He can't afford to lose that. He leans into Ponk. His skin is cooler than a human's, but the presence is comforting all the same.

There is a long silence that Sam fills with sniffles and sobs, not caring that the crew watches on awkwardly, shuffling their feet and looking at the ground.

"We're going to find him." Bad says, finally speaking where he had shied away before.

"He could be dead," Sam says numbly, not looking up from where his face is buried in Ponk's shoulder. He doesn't look up to see the reaction that gets. "He was the last one. They killed everyone else. I think I was next, but now that I'm not there..." Sam lets out a shaky breath.

No one says anything.

Sam gets to his feet, intending to walk out of the room and sleep off his breakdown before returning in the morning to pretend that nothing had happened.

He doesn't do that.

His knees give out from under him immediately, and he is too tired to even try to catch himself. He just lays there, the sounds of the crew's various noises of surprise washing over him. He stares at the dust on the floor, at the way his fingers splay out, staying limp as Puffy attempts to maneuver him into a sitting position.

"Are you okay?" Ant asks from where he is perched on the counter. He looks concerned, as much as a cat-thing can look concerned. Sam doesn't respond, just lets his head lull back onto Puffy's shoulder.

"I'm changing," Sam says hollowly. "I don't know what they did back there, some sort of... genetic testing. My teeth... my hair, my *eyes* . I don't even *look* like myself anymore." The room is silent. "I think that's why they didn't kill me. They wanted to see what would happen."

He curls onto his side, shoulders shaking.

"It hurts so much," He sobs, and then there is a hand on his back.

He looks back to see Ponk.

"Come on," He says in English. "Let's go lie down."

When Sam gets up again, Ponk supports his weight. He's about the right height to be used as a crutch, which makes Sam smile, tired as he is.

They leave the control room, away from prying eyes and away from the people who had hurt him so badly. It helps. A little.

They end up in Ponk's room.

Sam hadn't seen it before. He hadn't really gone into any of the other's rooms. He didn't know if it was the same in all of their cultures, but rooms being off-limits was a pretty well-ingrained belief in him by now.

It's nice. It's dark, apart from the heat lamp that rests in a corner, turned on, which is *definitely* a fire hazard. It's messy, there are magazines scattered around. Sam spots what looks like a romance novel featuring a buff human on the cover. He politely ignores it.

They don't talk for a while, just lie on their backs on Ponk's unmade bed.

"Did I ever thank you?" Sam asks, eventually, once his heart rate has gone back to normal.

"For what?" Ponk asks, completely genuinely, and Sam snorts.

"For getting me out. For helping me." Sam says, quiet.

"I don't think so, not formally." He says after thinking for a few moments.

"Well, thank you," Sam says. "For everything."

"You're welcome." He says, eyes crinkling under his mask. "For everything."

He falls asleep in Ponk's bed and he dreams of home.

Hollow Shell

Chapter Summary

cw
-vomitting
-death ment
-blood
-dead bodies

Chapter Notes

sam goes detecting. nancy drew!
he finds nothing good

Over the course of fifteen days Sam deteriorates.

The changes have progressed, and the pain is getting worse, to the point where there are days he can't bring himself to get out of bed, even as the guilt for not helping look for Tommy eats him alive. On those days Ponk comes and sits with him and reads things in Common to help with his vocabulary, stopping to explain words that Sam doesn't understand.

His teeth- his new teeth, the sharp ones, are partially grown in, and he can't stop prodding at the new protrusions with his tongue. He can't bite through his nails anymore, they've grown thicker. Tougher. Sharper too, to the point where trying to bite his nails leaves him with a bloody lip. His hair continues to grow out green, and his eyes- eventually Sam was able to identify that they too were growing in green.

The color isn't the only thing that changed. He's developing some sort of lucidium- a tissue underneath his cornea that allows him to see in the dark. It's trippy, waking up in the night and being able to make out all his surroundings. In certain angles, he can see his eyes reflecting like a cat's, like tiny twin moons sunken into his pale face.

His body hair is the next change that he had noticed, growing in green to match his hair, but thicker too, coarser. No part of him has been left soft. The thought aches.

Throughout all of it, Ponk has been great company.

It surprised him, to learn that this was not a long con to exact revenge on Sam, Ponk genuinely just wants to be his friend. It makes him feel guilty and twisted for what he had

done, but Ponk doesn't seem to hold anything against him, even with his missing arm.

"The way I see it," He had said. "You thought I was a wild animal, and you were terrified. It was pretty dumb of me to come in and try to talk to you, but I don't really regret anything."

Sam thinks that for someone so smart, Ponk sure is stupid.

On the sixteenth day after Sam had come clean about his changes, Bad bursts into Sam's room, making Ponk pause what he had been reading and Sam to sit up in alarm.

"We got the signal."

Sam slams into the control room door, running too fast to stop, and then struggles with the handle for a few seconds before managing to get it open, and bursts inside, panting. Bad and Ponk are not far behind him.

"Where is he?" Sam says, already hurrying to the monitor.

"Not far from here," Ant says, winding around the bulky computers. "He landed on a residential planet. It's strange, though, I can't figure out why he would have landed with... something so *illegal* on board."

"Who *cares* why?" Sam snaps before bringing up his hands in a tenting motion and taking a deep breath to calm himself down. "We need to get there as soon as possible, if it's some sort of... trade. We need to get him-"

"We're already charting a course," Bad says, putting a hand on his shoulder. Sam ducks away from the touch, stomach rolling at the sensation. Bad, to his credit, at least has enough sense to look guilty. "Sorry."

Ponk makes a sound that Sam is *assuming* is a cheer, but sounds more like a roar to his ears.

"Yeah! Let's go rescue a human pup!"

"Kid," Sam corrects gently.

"Whatever!"

It takes three hours to get there.

Sam, after being told it would be too dangerous to go on-planet, has spent the entire time in the ship's workshop, which is mostly barren but still has enough spare materials to make what

he's making.

It's a mask, made of some thick sheets of metal he's welded together, tinted glass making up the eye holes so no one would be able to see his apparently distinct human eyes. The only glass he could find that wasn't clear is tinted dark green, much to his annoyance. He guesses it doesn't hurt to have a theme.

He attaches the straps, a thick band of elastic, and holds out his mask to admire his work. He was never an artist, but he has a *lot* of experience in metal work, and his days as a mechanic taught him a lot about welding. He sighs deeply, turning the mask over in his hands. It's a bit ugly, but hey, it'll do its job.

The door opens behind him and he turns to see Puffy, looking serious. Or, as serious as a goat-alien-pirate can look.

"We're landing." She says, and yeah, now that Sam is paying attention, he can feel the ship shaking beneath his feet as they descend. He nods and follows her back to the control room. He pulls the mask over his face as soon as they enter, and Bad frowns at him.

"Sam, you cant follow us down there, it's not-"

"You aren't going to stop me," Sam says firmly, because he's not. Sam knows he can do damage, and with as much pain and grief as these modifications have caused him, it's not like they aren't going to do him any favors in a fight. Bad's mouth twitches in disapproval, but he doesn't say anything, just turns away.

The ship jolts hard, and Sam is nearly knocked off his feet, only saved from an embarrassing sprawl over the floor by Ponk coming up beside him and holding him up.

"No tail means worse balance, right?" He asks, eyes crinkling, and Sam finds himself looking at his friend for a bit too long. He stands again as soon as the ship has stopped its shaking, and dutifully ignores how hot the back of his neck is. It's just nerves from having to go on planet, and if it's not well, that'll be something that can be dealt with later.

"I'll be back," Sam says as he walks towards the exit. "With Tommy."

"You don't want us to come with you?" Skeppy asks.

"No," Sam says, adjusting his mask one final time as the door slides open. "I have to do this alone. I don't want a bunch of aliens walking up to him, it'll scare the crap out of him. Uh- no offense."

"None was taken," Bad says softly. Ponk waves him goodbye, a gesture Sam had taught him, and then the door slides shut again, cutting him off from the crew and leaving him in a forest of red-orange trees.

He swallows and steps forward, grateful that his boots have remained intact after all these months. He steps over dead leaves and branches until he finds a path, lined with white stone. He follows it, silent, mouth dry. He's terrified, but behind that is hope.

He walks until he sees a town. Homes made up of the same orange wood and white stone that makes up the rest of the forest, there are people milling around, giving him the same curious look. He pulls his hood tighter over his head and tries to walk like he's the most unsuspicious person in the world. He needs to find a place with information. Someone who knows what they're talking about.

"Excuse me," He says to a passing townspeople. They turn to look at him, and Sam hopes it's not *too* weird to wear a mask in public. "Is there a bar around here?"

The stranger tilts their head back the way they came, and Sam nods in thanks before taking off in the direction the alien had pointed him, trying to walk as fast as he can without looking like he's running.

Sure enough, he comes to a stop in front of what must be a bar. The sign isn't in a language that Sam can read, of course, because when is anything ever *easy*, but there are pictures plastered on the inside of the window that *look* like drinks, so Sam takes an educated guess and walks inside.

It isn't like a western movie, no one turns to look when he enters, which Sam is grateful for, he doesn't think he could handle the attention right now. He slinks to the bar, shooting up another prayer that he doesn't look like he's about to rob the place.

"You about to rob the place?" A weasely-looking barkeep asks.

"No!" Sam squeaks, before realizing he had spoken in English and clearing his throat. "No." He says, much more gruffly this time. The weasely-looking man- and Sam really does mean weasely, he *actually* looks like an overlarge ferret, scoffs at him.

"Then buy something." He snarks. Sam reaches into his pockets to find the strange coins he'd been picking up off of the ground for the past three weeks.

"Whatever this can get me," He says and the weasel-thing peeks into his hand before snatching the coins away and pouring something into a wooden cup.

"Here," He says gruffly, slamming the drink down on the counter. "Byioon. Finest in all of Meirk."

"Thanks," Sam murmurs, taking the drink but not daring to sip at it. He does not want to get poisoned today, thank you. "I just wanted to ask-" The weasel thing groans but Sam has come too far to be deterred by rude barkeepers. "I wanted to ask about any human sightings around here."

The weasel-thing pauses in his cleaning, his beady eyes darting up to meet Sam's from where they hide behind the glass of his mask.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Why does anyone do anything?" Sam shoots back, a little obstinately, in hindsight. The weasel-thing just laughs at his response.

"Ah, alright. You've heard the rumors then?" Weasel-thing asks. Sam nods, hope rising in his chest. "A ship crashed here around... I'd say two and a half weeks ago. Human came waltzing into town like it owned the place, trying to steal food before it was chased off."

"What did they look like?" Sam says, maybe a bit too quickly. The weasel thing stares at him for a few seconds.

"I dunno, a human? Yellow fur, though it was hard to tell with all the dirt."

Tommy .

"Not that it matters anymore, that thing is long dead."

For a second, Sam doesn't process what he said.

"What?" He asks, his ears ringing, his heart speeding up, his body reacting to the news faster than his brain is.

"With no food, no clean water, and after a crash like *that*? It was pretty injured when it showed up, so there's nothing to worry about now."

Sam's fists clench, he can feel his now-sharp nails cutting into his skin even though his gloves.

"Where was the crash?" He asks, voice somehow even. He barely can hear himself speak.

"The woods." Weasel-thing says, suspicious. Afraid. It doesn't matter.

" *Where* in the woods?" Sam snarls, slamming his hands down on the counter. The thud rings out through the small bar, drawing the eyes of the patrons. It's quiet for a few seconds.

"You some sort of hunter?" Weasel-thing asks. Sam says nothing. The weasel-thing chortles, an ugly-sounding clicking-squeaking noise that lances through Sam's ears.

"Well if you're so determined to find its body, follow the white path. Go left." The barkeep sets down the glass he'd been cleaning. "Now get the fuck out of my bar."

Sam does so without hesitation, sweeping out the door and running to the woods, suspicion be damned. He has answers, and even if they aren't exactly the answers he was looking for, he knows that Tommy was *here*. He must still be here. There is nowhere else to go. He shakes the barkeep's words out of his head. Tommy is *fine*. He's a tough kid. After everything they'd been through, he wouldn't just *die*. Not from a crash. Not from something so mundane and unheroic. Tommy would be furious to survive so much and then die in a crash. Not that that thought matters, because Tommy isn't dead.

He finds the path, stumbling over white stones risen out from the leaf mulch, catching himself on a tree. He heaves a breath and then runs down the path, spewing up nettles and dirt beneath his boots. Tommy only has one shoe, when Sam finds him he's going to have to

make sure his feet don't have any wounds that are going to get infected. Again, he's not super sure about the legitimacy of space antibiotics, and Tommy is too precious to test them on.

He runs for a long time.

He stops when he smells burning, skidding to a stop, grabbing onto a breach to steady himself, looking up and up and up to the tops of the not-pines, to the blackened tops of them, like something had crashed through them.

He goes left, a little slower now, but only because he has to. There is no path here, and he won't make it to Tommy at all with a broken leg if he trips over something in a dead sprint.

He runs until he sees a patch of upturned dirt and felled trees as long as half a football field. He stops short, mouth falling open at the sight ahead of him. At the end of the fissure that had been gouged out of the ground lays a ship. The hollow shell of what once was a ship at least.

This, Sam reasons, must be Dream's ship.

It's... smaller than he imagined it would be.

When he was inside, the ship felt huge, inescapable, a maze of cold metal walls and infinite doors.

It's maybe the size of a small house, if not a little smaller. It's silver, though much of it has been blackened or otherwise tarnished, windows smashed out, probably by locals trying to loot it.

Despite all his instincts telling him to stay away from that God-awful ship, Sam walks forward on trembling legs, hands reaching out to brush the smooth metal. It's still slightly hot to the touch, though the fires have long since burned out. Sam breathes out, his breath trembling in his throat.

He walks around to the front of the ship to see the control room- or what he assumes to be so, the window has been smashed out. Sam crouches in front of the window, leaning his head in to see where the glass had landed.

Glass lays scattered over the darkened control room, meaning that the window was broken from the inside and bounced back into the room. Tommy. Sam hauls himself through the window, teeth clenched at even the idea of willingly going back into Dream's ship. It still smells like smoke. It's almost overwhelming. Sam wants to pull his shirt over his mouth and nose but he won't risk taking his mask off. He can't be sure the ship is completely empty, after all. The thought makes his stomach sink, but he can't just leave Tommy if he's here.

He steps over the glass, heedless of it. His boots are thick enough that it's not something he has to worry about, and moves deeper into the ship. Silent. Like a ghost.

For the first time, he's grateful for his... modifications. The night vision he'd gained makes it a hell of a lot easier to move around the ship, considering he has no portable light source and wouldn't risk it even if he did.

There is a door at the end of a short hallway, thrown open, gaping and dark like the yawning mouth of some terrible creature. Sam's stomach drops, and he sucks a sharp breath in, turning his head from the sight. His hands shake at his side. He has to. He has to.

That is the mantra he repeats as he walks towards the holding room, heart beating like cannon fire in his ears.

He walks in, pushing the door open a bit more. It's crumpled from the inside. Someone had broken it down. Sam thinks he knows who. He hopes he does.

The cages are empty, which Sam is glad for. Which he had *hoped* for. Still, that just means that Tommy isn't here. Sam doesn't bother investigating. With his night vision, he sees no bodies, alive or otherwise within the room, and he doesn't have the time to waste searching for someone who's not here. That's what he tells himself, not just that he's a coward who can't stand to be in this room a second longer.

He leaves, shoving his hands into his pockets to stop the trembling.

The next room he finds with the door open is what looks like an office. There is a desk overturned, papers scattered across the floor, a bookshelf that had toppled. There is a hand sticking out from beneath it, lying atop a dark puddle. The hand is clawed and deep red. Sam steps over it. That is not who he is looking for, just another one of the terrible creatures that still haunts his nightmares.

He sees faces on the pages that carpet the floor, some singed at the edges. There are pictures of the people from the cages. The man who sobbed every second he was awake, the man who had been taken away and returned catatonic until the day he vanished for good, the woman who had been murdered by her cell neighbor during the night. Sam catches a glimpse of his own face, his hair still blonde, his eyes still blue. He looks tired, scared, in the picture. He thinks they must have taken it while he was drugged, that first night. He still looks clean, healthy. He picks the paper up, folds it, and puts it in his pocket.

He sorts through the papers until he finds Tommy's. He looks scared, eyes round, mouth open, teeth flashing in the light of the camera. Sam breathes out through his nose, eyes tingling. He swallows and folds the paper, much more carefully than he had the last, and tucks it into his front pocket, right beside his own. He leaves the room.

He searches every room of that ship. He finds nothing.

Well, that's not true. He finds bodies, all alien. He finds the lab where they had done all their testing, he vomits on the tile floor of that lab. He finds papers with his face and unreadable swaths of text. He takes those too.

But he does not find Tommy.

He goes back to the control room, sweating and shaking, the heat of the burnt ship is giving him a headache, but he can't leave. Not until he's found Tommy, or at least some sign of where he had gone.

He stumbles over shattered glass and torn metal, bracing himself on the control panel, squeezing his eyes shut, trying to block out the pain. He needs to focus. He opens his eyes, gasping, drool pooling in his mouth with the need to vomit again, but he swallows repeatedly until the feeling passes. He has to focus. He has to find Tommy.

His eyes scan the control room one last time. One final search before he takes to the surrounding area and resorts to screaming Tommy's name until he gets a response. His eyes catch on something. Pale yellow fabric, soaked with something dark. Sam's tongue darts out to wet his lips and he steps forward, stumbling over himself. He falls to his knees in front of it, picking it up into his arms.

It's Tommy's.

Not officially, of course, because they owned nothing on this ship. Not even their own bodies, but this was the blanket they had given Tommy when he had been sick, and had never managed to take it back, with Tommy snapping at them every time they tried and Sam guarding it whenever Tommy was taken away.

It's bloody.

Not just spattered, not like when you wake up with a nose bleed, but enough that the blanket is stiff and creased, heavy with blood. Sam's eyes dart to a matching stain, leading over the control panel. Blood.

He looks over the room, breath hitching. The whole room is covered in blood. He hadn't noticed. He had been so single-minded. He hadn't noticed. He hadn't seen.

It's human blood. There is no workaround, no denying it. It's red, and so was Ponk's, but his blood was thin, sweet-smelling, undeniably alien. This... isn't. It's thick with iron, even dried, deep brown, almost black in the thinnest parts. It's human, it's-

It's Tommy's.

He was the last one. There was no one else who could have bled human blood.

It's too much.

It's too much blood.

With no one to help him, no medicine or bandages to even *water*, no one could lose this much blood and just walk away. No one can-

No one can survive this.

Sam stumbles backward, falling onto the glass. It cuts his legs and hands, but he doesn't care, he just clutched the blanket to himself and shakes.

Tommy isn't gone. That doesn't make sense. He's full of life, or at least he was the last time that Sam saw him. He's fine. He's out there in the woods somewhere.

'But he went out for food- for help, and no one has seen him since.' Says something terrible and traitorous in Sam's head. *'No one was there to help him, you weren't there to help.'*

"No," Sam breathes, pressing Tommy's blanket to his chest, panting. "No, no, no, no-"

He could very well go on like that forever, denying what he knows, sitting on the floor of a once-burning ship, but there is a voice outside.

"Hey!" Someone shouts in common. They sound stern. Sam startles, getting to his feet, getting in a fighting stance. "You can't be up there! It's unstable!"

Sam doesn't respond, just climbs over the control board and drops out of the busted window to the forest floor below. He can't feel his hands. He can't feel his body. He's still holding the blanket.

"Go home." Says the alien, and Sam again doesn't speak, just turns and walks.

There is nothing for him here. He will be run out if he stays, just like-

Holy shit.

Tommy is *dead* .

Sam gasps, sound ripping through his chest, his throat.

Tommy is dead.

What was any of this for?

Where is his body, Sam has to find his body.

"You need to go home," The alien says from behind him, noticing his sudden stop. "I'll call the police."

Sam wants to turn around and scream at them, he wants to tear their throat out, he wants to gut them for daring to send him away when Tommy's body could be here. He does none of those things. He turns, casts one final hidden glance at the alien and walks back to the path.

He walks over the white stone, kicking pebbles, not thinking. Barely breathing. He doesn't feel it yet, he might be in shock. Birds sing, but they sound like they're underwater. They sound nothing like the birds from Earth. There is nothing for him here. Tommy isn't here. Tommy isn't anywhere.

Sam blinks, and he's back at the Badlands. He looks up at ship, bigger than Dream's, but not nearly as shiny. He's still holding the blanket. He doesn't want to go inside. He doesn't want to tell them what he knows. He doesn't want to say it out loud, to make it real. He doesn't want their condolence, their pity. He doesn't want anything. Not anymore.

The ramp leading up to the ship descends and the door opens, revealing the crew standing there, all looking hopeful in their own unfamiliar ways.

"Well?" Ponk says, tilting his voice up at the end in the way that means he's excited. Sam says nothing, just walks up the ramp and shoulders his way past the aliens. They don't call after him, but he hears noises of shock from behind him. They're smart. They'll figure it out.

"Sam!" Ponk is saying, grabbing his sleeve. Everything feels very far away. Like he's watching this happen to someone else. He wishes he was. "What happened out there?"

Sam stares at Ponk for several seconds, mouth opening, trying to form words. What could he possibly say?

All he manages is a desperate sob, and then Sam crumbles to the floor, his tears shaking his body. He can't hear his cries nor the crew, he can't hear anything. He can't see. He can't feel.

He just sobs.

Barricade

Chapter Summary

okay warning for suicidal thoughts!!

Sam has barricaded himself in his room.

Literally. He's slid all manner of furniture over the door so no one can get in without a considerable amount of brute strength. He doesn't want to face them, he *can't* face them. He can't face getting up, eating, drinking, *anything*. He can't face living when Tommy isn't. He wraps his arms around himself, his legs stiff from staying stone still for... what has been? Two days now? It hardly matters. Nothing matters anymore.

During the first day of his self-imposed isolation, Ponk kept trying to come by, knocking on his door, trying to get it open, speaking to him in English. Asking questions Sam had no answer for. Telling him things are going to be okay, but he's *lying* because how could anything possibly be okay. His kid is dead. He's dead. He's *dead* and he's not coming back and Sam could have stopped it. They *all* could have stopped it. The thoughts spinning in his head like a swarm of bats all just make Sam feel worse, twisted and evil and *wrong* and he doesn't even know why. He doesn't know anything.

He had screamed at Ponk, swore at him and beat the wall with his fist, cursed the whole crew for what they had done. He should feel bad about it, he just doesn't have the energy. They stopped trying to get him out after that. They're probably trying to give him space. Sam hopes they're leaving him to die.

His mind is an echoing chamber, a constant reminder of his own failure. It blocks out everything else. It becomes everything.

He hates Bad. He has settled on that at least, in the storm of pain and confusion. Hate manages to break through the haze. He hates him for taking him away from Tommy. He hates him. He hates. It burns in his stomach like an ulcer.

He doesn't know how long it's been. Not really. Time has lost itself as much as Sam has, spinning hours into minutes and days into years. He can't feel his body, just the hunger and thirst that swells the longer he lays here. He won't get up. What's the point? Of staying alive? Of fighting? What would he even fight for? The one thing he had been working towards is dead. What now? Keep surviving day to day while the mutations his captors had forced on him continue to destroy his body until he is unrecognizable? To see flashes of his captors in the crew's faces? To survive when Tommy hadn't?

He's the last human he'll ever see, and the loneliness that thought brings makes him shudder.

So he ignores it when they call for him past the door, tries to get in past his barricade, when Ponk leaves food at the door and tells stories that fade into static like everything else.

He lays still, on his back, staring at the ceiling, the bare mattress chafing against his skin. He had torn his bedding off of his strange circular mattress before he'd collapsed atop it. The blankets and pillows lay in heaps around the bed. He doesn't deserve comfort. He doesn't deserve anything. He brings a hand up, examining the bloodied knuckles and swollen fingers apathetically. He'd broken his hand punching the walls, blood now spattered over the off-white paint. It doesn't matter. He won't ever leave this room. He will die with these bloody off-white walls.

It's something he'd decided on the first night, as he lay there bleeding and panting like a wild animal, that he wouldn't leave this room. The others wouldn't know how long he'd last. They wouldn't be able to stop him. Probably wouldn't even realize he was dead until they noticed that his screaming night terrors had ceased.

And what a beautiful idea. That it all would stop. All this pain, physical and emotional, would end. He would run in some distant grassy plain, barefoot, smiling, his joints no longer aching. His teeth blunt, his eyes blue. Human.

He wants that. He *needs* that.

He doesn't really know how long it's been, but he doesn't think he could stand up if he tried, so he must be getting close to three days. He hasn't had any water, but it's cool in this room and he has no blanket. He's not losing water, so it's going to take a while to dehydrate. Still, he's weakening. The trembling of his muscles even as he tries to lay still, the way his head spins every time he so much as shifts, how hard it's been getting to open his eyes once he shuts them.

He's dying.

What once was so terrifying is now a welcome thought, that he would be able to die on his own terms. Not murdered. Not vanished.

He wonders what his friends think. He wonders if they think he's dead. Who got his things? He blinks spots away from his vision, and tears fall down his cheeks.

Good. He thinks. I'll die a little faster.

The ship is quiet.

It's been quiet since Sam returned, wide-eyed and stumbling through the door. Since he retreated to his room and blocked the doors. Since he learned that Tommy is dead.

He didn't say it. Not out loud, but if there is something he found that would elicit this reaction that isn't Tommy's death then Ponk would love to hear it.

They still hear him sometimes. Hear him banging his fists against the wall, screaming in agony through the night, hear his wails of grief. Ponk almost prefers the silence, if not for the fact that the sounds the human makes are the only remaining evidence that he's alive. So he takes the wailing, the howling, and screaming and sits by the door and tells the human stories. He's been leaving food, hoping that Sam will come out of his room and take it while they're all asleep. He never does. Ponk always returns in the morning to a cold plate of food set out by the blocked door. He talks about this life, spun into dramatic epics of Shakespearian proportion (human history reference, thank you!), though he doesn't think that Sam is listening. The screaming stops when he does, though, so he goes there and he talks, dredging up all the English he knows, hoping some small sliver of home would bring Sam comfort.

Bad hasn't been well either. He blames himself for giving the order, and it seems like Sam does too, if the enraged screaming that erupts whenever Bad tries to speak to him is anything to go by. He screams in English. Ponk tells Bad that he can't understand the words, but he does, of course. He won't tell Bad what Sam is saying, not when his captain is already self-blaming.

Yes, Sam hates Bad. Ponk can't really blame him. His crew had made a terrible mistake, ruining a life and ending another in the process, and Bad had been the one to give the order. They had all carried it out, they are all to blame in some fashion, but Bad is the Captain. Bad gave the order.

Ponk doesn't know why Sam doesn't hate him too. He had shot the human twice, he was just as much to blame. There is a sharp twinge of phantom pain in his missing limb, making him wince. Well... maybe they were even on that front. Ponk hopes so. If taking his arm off was an accident he doesn't want to be on the other end of intentional revenge.

"Will be on-planet anytime soon?" Ponk asks from his position by the computer. He watches as Ant charts a course, paws somehow stepping on the proper buttons. Ponk will never not be impressed by the navigator's skill in dexterity despite not having traditional hands.

"No," Bad sighs, His shoulders slumped, his face turned towards the star-filled windows. "I don't want us landing with Sam on board. It's too dangerous."

Ponk can't argue with that. The last thing they need is to lose Sam too. He twitches at the sound of another pained wail from deep in the hall of the ship. Well, they're going to do everything they can to keep Sam from being taken away.

Ponk can't shake the feeling that they've already lost him.

Sam has once again started to carve the days into his surroundings. It's a little easier now, even with how weak he's become, to carve into the wood of his headboard instead of hard metal. By his calculations, which could easily be wrong, it has been five days. He doesn't have much longer, he knows that. He feels like he's dying, it's a feeling he's become well acquainted with. After all these months. Dehydration was a common problem back on the ship, people would vomit or cry constantly, and the constant illness didn't help much either.

They were given so little water, just enough to survive if you laid still, but not enough for the conditions they were in. Not enough to sustain the injuries they had gained, the pieces of their bodies that were taken. So, in short, Sam is used to this. He is used to not having enough water, he is used to not having enough food. He is used to feeling like he is dying. This, though, will be the first time he did it of his own free will.

He doesn't feel bad about it. Not really. There is no one left to miss him. His friends and distant family probably all think he's dead now anyway, and now that Tommy is gone, what could he possibly do out here? What could he possibly do *anywhere*? So he lays there and he lets himself waste away. He feels sad in a distant way that his body won't be buried on Earth, and even more still that he won't have a funeral. Or at least not a human one. At most he'll probably be thrown out the airlock with a few kind words, but even that is pushing it with the amount of damage he's done to the team. Most likely he will be thrown out of the airlock in silence, to be forgotten. He wishes he could tell them to pray for his soul. He was never the most religious guy, but in times like this what else is there to do? He isn't concerned about heaven, it isn't a huge thought in his mind that there is some endless cloudy paradise. If there is though, he wants to go there. He doesn't know if he deserves it, but he doesn't really think he believes in Hell either. Really he just wants to go back to Earth. It'll be quite some doing, and he really hopes his soul is not lost to space. He wants to tell the others to pray for his safe return to earth. He doesn't think he'll have the time.

He knows that if the team knew what he was doing they would try to stop him. Some misplaced sense of guilt, or in Bad's case a very well-placed sense of guilt, trying to keep him alive even though he has nothing anymore. He will not let them do that, this is the only way.

When the artificial sun rises Sam carves another line into his headboard to mark the sixth day.

A human being can last three days without water, and two weeks without food, and that's with him laying in the dark and cold. He doesn't know if the lack of sweating is helping. Honestly he had never thought to check. It has been six days, he has had no water and still, he's alive.

He has to blame his modified genetics for his continued survival. He doesn't know what they were trying to make, or if he was just some sacrificial lamb they slotted all their testing into. One way or another, he's still alive. He's weak, a shriveled husk of what he once was, But he's alive. Unfortunately.

It's become a waiting game. Lying in silence on a bare, prickly mattress, staring at the ceiling. Carving lines into wooden headboards. Ignoring the ache in his throat, the roaring of his stomach. He deserves this. He could not save him. He deserves this. He could not save him.

It is a mantra he repeats when the pain grows so great that he is almost willing to give up the ghost and go back outside. He will not do that though, he will not keep hurting like this.

It is on the sixth day that his brain seems to make a choice for him and decides to get up and get the others, some final act of instinctive self-preservation. He rolls to his side, and then

can't move anymore, panting at the effort. It is then that he realizes something that is as much a comfort as it is a horrifying truth.

He can't move.

He cannot bring himself to stand. There is nothing he can do anymore, he is helpless. He is going to die.

The terror that this knowledge brings is as surprising as it is righteous. He deserves to feel the same helpless terror that his ward had felt while bleeding out in the cockpit of the ship. He deserves this. He could not save him.

He deserves this. He could not save him. He deserves this. He could not save him.

Six days. Six days of radio silence, besides the wailing, and Ponk is worried.

Actually- scratch that, he is *beyond* worried. He is petrified for his friend, and he still can't get in the door. His stories elicit no response, the food goes uneaten, the water undrunk. For the past two days there has been no screaming. At first, it was a welcome thing, they thought that Sam was finally, *finally* started to heal. The nightmares were starting to cease.

The relief ends with a textbook.

Bad is chopping some root vegetable, eyes glazed over, distracted. Ponk knows what he's thinking about. What everyone on the ship has been thinking about since Sam had returned empty-handed.

"How long can a human go without food or water?" Bad asks quietly.

"Two weeks." Ponk murmurs, careful not to break the tentative silence of the kitchen, only intercut by the muted sound of the knife hitting the wooden board.

"We're about at the halfway point then," Bad says mildly, his eyes staring off into nothing. "We'll need to get him on IV soon."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Ponk says, straightening up. "You know what happened on the last ship."

"Of course I know," Bad says, chopping his vegetable a little more aggressively. "But it's that or he starves to death. Which would you rather he take?"

Ponk certainly knows what *Sam* would prefer, but he is not willing to admit that. Especially not to Bad. Not when his friend is like this, so torn up over the order he'd given. So he says nothing. He stands up and leaves the kitchen, desperate to get away from the oppressive atmosphere that has surrounded his Captain for the past six days.

He has a book, somewhere amongst the piles of junk in his bedroom, that covers how to help an injured human. And this one is actually a textbook and not a romance novel, *thank you*.

It's one of the rare ones that actually talk about how to help, made by people like him. People who care about humans as something beyond terrifying monsters. He knows there's a section about depression. He remembers it, maybe there's something in there that can help.

He digs the book out of a pile of dirty clothes, and opens it to the table of contents, running his finger down the page until he finds the chapter titled 'Mental Illness' in bold black lettering. Right below it, is it chapter called 'Diet'. He purses his lips and opens it to Chapter Eight: Diet, and skims the pages. He needs to know what to feed Sam after he feels up to eating again, what will get him back up to speed the fastest.

'A human being,' The book reads. 'Can survive two weeks without food,'

Right yeah, of course, just tell him what to feed him to make him feel better - well, feel better physically, he doesn't think food is going to help with the emotional pain.

'And three days without water.'

Ponk stares at the sentence printed on the bone-white pages, not quite processing it. The realization comes to him slowly, dripping over him like sludge.

He had misremembered the passage.

It has been six days, and he has not heard hide nor hair of Sam for two of them.

He is on his feet immediately, the book falling off his lap and hitting the floor with a dull thud as he sprints out towards the main body of the ship.

They need to get Sam out now.

If he's even alive in there.

Saline

Chapter Summary

cw:

-self harm

-suicide attempt

-gore (in a nightmare)

Panic is a funny thing. So useless beyond a baser instinct, usually doing more harm than good. Ponk is not usually one to panic, but now? Oh, *now* he is panicking. He runs, considering not even stopping to tell his crew what happened, but he won't be able to get the door open by himself. He can't do this alone. Puffy is the first person he sees, reading a book at the kitchen table.

"Puffy," He breathes, voice coming out like steam from a cracked pipe. "Puffy I think Sam is dead." It isn't even what he meant to say. It's those baser instincts once again taking over. The book is closed, she's on her feet.

"*What?* Why?"

"I thought- I thought it said humans can survive two weeks without water-" Ponk is gasping out, panic squeezing his chest. Suffocating him. "It didn't- It wasn't- Puffy, it was *three days* ."

The chair is pushed back from the table with a screech that hurts Ponk's ears, then they are both running, hooves and claws alike clicking down the long metal hallways.

"Emergency!" Puffy is shouting into any room they pass. "Everyone to Sam's room *now!*" The ship is small enough that they likely all heard her scream the first time, but she keeps yelling anyway. If Ponk has to guess he'd say nervous energy, but who really knows. They skid to a stop at Sam's door. It does not budge when they push it.

"Sam!" Ponk shouts through the metal. "Say something!"

The room is predictably silent. Ponk snarls in his throat, though it comes out more like a desperate sob as he shoulders the door with his remaining arm. It serves no purpose besides making his shoulder ache. Puffy pulls him back when the others arrive, called by Puffy's screams for help.

"What happened?" Bad asks immediately, eyes wide and frightened.

"Ponk thinks Sam might be dead." Puffy grits out from where she is trying to force the door open. There is a chorus of horrified noises.

"Humans can survive three days without water," Ponk says before any of them can ask. "I- I hope I'm wrong but- I mean, it's been six."

"Okay," Bad says evenly, and Ponk recognizes his *'this is an emergency but I'm the Captain so I'm pretending to be calm'* voice. "Everyone please step back for a moment."

None of them hesitate in following his orders. With a deep breath in, Bad draws his leg close to himself and kicks the door with a huff of exertion. The door dents underneath his hooves, but doesn't give. Ponk hears something fall, no doubt part of Sam's barricade, and before he can urge his Captain to keep going, Bad is drawing his leg back again and kicking the door. He kicks it over and over again until there is a sizeable hole in the door and most of the barricade has been knocked over. Bad reaches through the crumpled metal and unlocks it from the inside. The door swings open, knocking what little furniture that had been left of the barricade tumbling to the floor.

"Sam?" Ponk asks, darting around his crew to see Sam. He stops so quickly that he nearly falls backward upon entering the room.

Sam is laying, curled in on himself, on a bare mattress, his bedding torn away and left in heaps on the ground. He isn't moving. His skin is so pale it looks grey in the fluorescent light of the room. It smells awful, like sweat and vomit. Like death.

Ponk steps forward. All the others have halted at the door. One reaches out for him. He ignores them. There are lines carved into his headboard. Six of them. There are lines carved into his arms. Many, many more than six. Ponk sees blood under Sam's claws. He feels nauseous. He puts a hand on Sam's wrist, the way they always do it to check a human's pulse in movies or books. He feels nothing but cold skin under his fingers for a few seconds, a time in which a pit that feels endlessly big opens in his stomach. He shifts the angle, wraps his fingers a little tighter, and feels movement, like wing beats against his fingertips. He goes boneless in relief, collapsing over his friend's still body. There is clamor from behind him, and he stiffens and holds out a hand to stop the impending chaos. If Bad is able to stay calm to be a good Captain then Ponk can do the same to be a good healer.

"He's alive." He says evenly, not looking away from Sam's face. "He's dehydrated. I need him on IV. Puffy, go set up a drip. Bad, gurney, the rest of you, sterilize everything in the med bay."

His crew runs off to do as he had asked, which he will thank them for later, but for now he needs to focus on not letting Sam die. He can do this. He can *do* this.

While he waits for Bad to return with a gurney, he starts to position Sam into a recovery position. It's specifically for humans, one of the things in his book. He hopes now more than ever that it's accurate. When Sam gets better he'll have to have him look over it and confirm or deny stuff.

He keeps that in his head, the idea that there will be an 'after this'. That it's not an if, it's a when. Sam doesn't so much as twitch as Ponk maneuvers him, but he holds all the terror in the very bottom of his throat, just below the surface. Panic, after all, is a baser instinct. He can't panic. His hands cannot afford to shake.

He hears the rattling of wheels down the hall and makes an effort to straighten his posture. Right now the crew is going to be counting on him to know what he's doing, and looking defeated is only going to stress everyone out. He can put his feelings by the wayside for now, just until Sam's survival is assured. Bad bursts in with the gurney in front of him, slightly wild-eyed, panting. Ponk can understand how he feels, Sam's clammy skin too cold under his hands. Humans are warm-blooded. Feeling Sam cold beneath him is enough to stop his hearts. Metaphorically. He's fine. Sam, however... not so much. Which is why he hurries to lift him onto the gurney, only managing with Bad's help. If Ponk had to guess he would say that Sam weighs about a hundred pounds, and though he can't say for *sure*, he's pretty sure that's too low of a weight. They'll have to make sure that Sam has a better diet when he is able to eat again. It might not be for a while, if he's been starving himself like this, they might have to do a liquid diet for a while. Ponk shakes himself out of his doctor thoughts and runs behind Bad down the hall to get to the med bay where they have *actual* materials to help his friend.

They burst into the room like a whirlwind, the door is swinging open and then clicking shut behind them. The crew is already there, Puffy is ready with the drip, so Ponk wastes no time in setting up the injection site with disinfectant and slotting the needle into his friend's arm. He's almost glad that Sam is unconscious, he is sure the human would fight him if he was awake to see the needle in his arm. It seems like he didn't have great medical experiences on the last ship, and Ponk really doesn't think he can fight him long enough to actually manage to get an IV in him.

As it is, Sam does not even twitch when the needle goes into his arm and the saline solution starts to pump into his blood. Which is as concerning as much as it is relieving, Ponk does not want Sam in any additional distress, if he's right, and he's sure that he is then he thinks that this was a suicide attempt. Nothing else can explain why he would willingly starve and dehydrate to the point of coming very close to death, after coming back from finding his son dead in the woods. But that can be handled later, right now Ponk has to focus on keeping him alive so they can talk through it later. He won't let this happen again, he'll be on suicide watch for some time but for now, he's going to focus on not letting his friend die.

Just because his friend is out of the room he had chosen to die in and on IV doesn't mean that Ponk can relax, because now it's time to do an actual full medical exam on his friend, and that's going to be hard because he is a *human*, and there is so little known about humans that any sort of invasive medicine would be horribly ill-advised. So that means Ponk is left with really unreliable sources for non-invasive medicine after his friend almost died.

He takes a deep shuttering breath and brings his hand down by his side, trying to calm his shaking breathing and slow the tears in his eyes. He can't afford to have his vision blurred by pointless tears, he has to be the strongest one in the room right now. Later he can break down, later he can cry, but right now he has to focus on his friend.

He checks for fever, his temperature is 102 when translated to Fahrenheit, which if his book is to be believed is not a deadly fever, but definitely something to look out for and try to bring down. He sends off for someone to bring him a bowl of cold water and cloth, and he lays the stopping cloth on his friend's forehead. He wipes away the water that trips into his eyes, careful not to nick his thin skin with his claws.

"You feeling okay?" Bad asks tentatively, putting a hand on his shoulder and nearly making Ponk jump out of his skin.

"I'm fine." Ponk lies evenly, ducking away from the touch. "Right now I'm going to focus on Sam, everything else can come later."

Bad makes the face he always makes when he disapproves of something Ponk is doing, but takes his hand away and backs off. Sam takes in a sharp breath, immediately drawing Ponk's attention.

"Hey you're okay man, you're in the med bay." Ponk doesn't know if Sam can hear him, but if he's confused or scared or doesn't know where he is, then Ponk is going to try to help.

"You're okay." He keeps repeating it, maybe if he says it enough times it'll be true.

If Sam could scream he would be doing so.

He's running but also not, the feeling of being chased squeezes his heart like a vice, And his lungs burn like he's running, but he doesn't seem to be going anywhere. He's in the woods, orange trees and a pale sky. There is a crash somewhere. He smells burning rubber, he smells burning flesh. Tommy is screaming for him, but he can't figure out where his voice is coming from, it sounds like it's echoing from all around him. He hears the younger boy get murdered, just to have him scream again, and then choke on his blood once more. He hears the laughter of the aliens, it doesn't sound any different from human laughter, but he knows it's alien in the way you know in dreams. He doesn't think he's ever actually heard an alien laugh, not that he would recognize the sound.

"Help me!" Tommy screams his voice coming from every hollow of every tree. "You left me!"

"I-I didn't want to!" Sam cries out, desperately trying to make sure Tommy knows that he didn't leave his own volition. Couldn't live with himself if Tommy thought that he just left without saying goodbye. "They took me! I had no choice!"

"You could have killed them!" Tommy wails. "You could have come back to me if you really wanted to! You let them kill me!"

"I didn't! I thought-"

He hears the sound of Tommy choking on his blood again. He covers his ears but it doesn't dampen the sound.

When he next opens his eyes he sees a body, laying on the ground arms bent unnaturally. Broken. There are shadowy figures standing above him, their eyes glinting in the muted sunlight. They're laughing, human laughter, warped and twisted. They twirl in the air like smoke. Sam rushes forward, a voiceless cry on his lips. He falls to his knees by Tommy's

side, pulling his body up into his arms. As he does, the body melts away, like sand, like ashes. He has no body to bury. He has no one.

"I'm sorry," He says, like a mantra. There's no one there to listen. No one there to hear his apologies. "I'm sorry I didn't come back for you, I would have if I could-"

"Selfish." Comes a voice from behind him. He turns, terrified. There he stands, Tommy. His skull is cracked down the center, blood dripping onto his shirt like a waterfall. His arms are broken, One of his feet is twisted the wrong way, his torso has been torn apart. Something wet and terrible glistens in the light, hanging out of his open chest.

"What?" Sam breathes, nearly retching at the sight before him.

"You're selfish." The specter repeats. "You let me die. You *left* me. And when you found out what had happened, you were too much of a coward to accept it. You would rather die than face what you had done."

The ghost grows in size, casting a dark shadow over the clearing. The birds have stopped singing.

"That makes you a coward."

Sam falls to his knees. He cannot deny it.

"If I saw you now, as you are. I would not recognize you." Tommy says. "A monster."

Sam's hands are sharp now. Covered in coarse fur. His teeth feel heavy in his mouth, his eyes hurt terribly.

He can deny nothing Tommy says.

"I'm sorry," He chokes out, voice muffled behind his sharp teeth. Tommy looks down at him, his lip curled.

"I don't forgive you."

Sam wakes up screaming. There are hands on him, trying to stop him from clawing himself apart, but he bashes them away, trying to escape. Something tugs in his arm and he recognizes a needle, he screams and yanks it out, feeling the warm blood drip down his arm. It's still red. He's still human. The sight brings him something that feels like relief, but it doesn't halt any of the panic coursing through him. He lived. He's up.

He wails again, anguished.

"Why couldn't you have just let it happen?" He screams, banging his fists against the floor as the crew watches on in horror. "I've got nothing left! I've- I've hurt you all so bad... Just- just-" He trails off into sobs, covering his face.

Ponk has his arm around him, he buries his face in his shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're okay," He whispers. Sam can hear the tears in his voice. With shaky hands, Sam raises his arms to wrap around Ponk too, careful not to squeeze too hard.

He lets himself fall apart.

The Sixth Stage

Chapter Summary

cw:

-suicide mention

-mention of seizures

Sam had survived.

His friends- and he knows now what they are to him, called it a miracle, but Sam isn't so sure. He's done trying to end his own life, not that he'd get the opportunity to with the way his friends watch him like a team of particularly anxious hawks. It's been about two weeks since he was bodily dragged from the room he had been sure he would die in, and Sam is still miserable most of the time. His attention lapses often, he finds himself staring at the wall mid-conversation, all sound faded into a low buzzing. There are times he can't be snapped out of it, has to be led back to Ponk's room, to his bed on the floor to sit and stare at the ceiling until he can process what's going on around him. He has no memory of that, of course, but Ponk says it's unsettling, watching his eyes go all glassy and wide, like he's seen something terrifying, and then not respond to anything they do to try to get his attention. Ponk still sits with him when he gets like this, tells him stories and braids his hair, even though Sam is unsettling. Even though he won't remember any of it.

Sam had thought they were absence seizures at first, brought on by his self-imposed starvation. He doesn't know much about seizures, but he knows that they can be dangerous even if they seem benign, so he makes Ponk run tests on him while he's spaced out. Ponk is reluctant, not wanting to trigger Sam's PTSD with the laboratory setting, but Sam is insistent. If he is having seizures and doesn't do anything about it, it will be much more dangerous than a panic attack. Besides, it's not like he'll be able to remember any of it anyway.

So Ponk had run his test, scanned his brain and found no signs of a seizure. So it isn't medical. It's internal. Somehow, that's worse. Sam keeps going catatonic at random times, he keeps having these... outbursts, rage or sorrow, or some other unidentifiable emotion that he can only describe as '*big*'. He hasn't spoken to Bad, not since leaving the med bay after his attempt. The captain doesn't seek him out, which Sam is grateful for. He needs space. He still has nightmares about being taken off of Dream's ship by Bad, the last thing he needs is to look him in the eye. To try and be cordial to the person who had taken him away from Tommy. He can't. He doesn't know if he hates Bad, he just knows that he feels... a lot of emotion when he thinks about the captain, and he can't handle that right now. It probably doesn't help that every time he catches a glimpse of Bad he has to shake the fog that comes over him, urging him back into not thinking, not hearing or seeing. The brief respite it brings.

Ponk is a Godsend. He seems to see when the darkness crops up behind Sam's eyes, like some sort of weird sixth sense. Or... one more sense than however many his species has. The moment Sam starts to spiral, Ponk is at his side with a joke or a story, somehow always managing to make Sam laugh, even when he feels like the only thing he wants to do is crawl into a hole and die.

It isn't easy.

Even with Ponk, helpful as he is, Sam is still fighting to get through every day. His meals are eaten in solitude, he can't sleep most nights, and when he does he wakes up screaming. He's listless, wandering. He doesn't want to talk about it, he *can't* talk about it. His throat closes up the second he tries, but then all his feelings, all the pain he's feeling gets bottled up inside him. Left to rot. To get worse until the infection spreads and eventually kills him. Maybe the metaphor had gotten away from him at some point.

Ponk, of course, is the one who manages to get him to talk.

Sam was on his back, lying in the nest of blankets he had built on Ponk's floor. Ponk is talking, Sam is coming out of his funk, blinking rapidly as the world spins back into focus.

“-told her that I'd eat it for twenty credits, but she really was just using metaphor-“

“I'm back,” Sam groans, sitting up and putting a hand over his eyes. The lights always feel horrifically bright when he comes back from his own head.

“Sammy!” Ponk cheers, opening his arms for a hug. Sam leans in to embrace him. Ponk had stopped attempting to tackle hug Sam when he nearly got thrown through a window, which Sam appreciates.

“How long was I out?” Sam asks. It must have been a while, his voice is croaky and he would *kill* for a glass of water. Metaphorically.

“A couple of hours,” Ponk sighs. “Not too bad. You missed dinner, though. I brought it up here.” Sure enough, there is a bowl of soup on Ponk's bedside table. It looks like it's gone cold by now, but that's not a huge issue. He can always warm it up.

He breathes through his nose. Today had been a bad day. He's been thinking about Tommy, which isn't unusual, but today particularly he's been thinking about the numerous ways he had failed Tommy. Ponk sees the look in his eyes.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He asks, like he does every time. Sam shrugs, like he does every time. He looks out the window, long enough that Ponk gets a sad look on his face. Like he thinks Sam is spacing out again.

“Does your culture have an afterlife?” Sam asks, eyes still glued to the porthole set into Ponk's wall, showing the passing stars. Ponk startles a little at the sudden question.

“Uh- kind of. Our spirits go to hang out in the plants for a while, become part of our planet, you know?”

Sam hums.

“Oh. Cool.”

“So... do humans have an afterlife?” Ponk asks, scooting closer to Sam.

“Yeah.”

“Tell me about it?”

“Well- there are different kinds, depending on like- your culture or where you’re from, but I believe in ghosts. Tommy did too.” Sam says, pretending not to see the way Ponk’s eyes widen. “Some humans, like me and Tommy, believe that when a person dies their ghost- which is their soul and memories and personality, can appear and watch over people they cared about in life. When someone you care about dies you can sometimes... you know. Still see them.” Sam goes quiet. “I- I haven’t seen him.” He says finally, voice breaking.

“When my grandmother died, I saw her.” Sam blurts out. “The night she died, I had a dream she came to speak with me, it- it made her feel less gone. Like she was out there somewhere, her body is just gone but- with Tommy... I- he’s just *gone*.” Sam curls in on himself a little. “We... I didn’t even find his body. We didn’t even have a funeral.”

“We can still have one,” Ponk says softly. Sam shakes his head.

“No. Not without a body. I can't handle that. I cant- I cant get through explaining how to hold a funeral, not when-“ Not when it’s for Tommy. Sam hangs his head, a shuddering breath escaping him. He can't get through a funeral, even though Tommy deserves one. Deserves to have a ceremony to celebrate the life he had led. He likely didn't have one on Earth when he was taken. From what little Sam knows about his life before he didn't have much in the ways of family and was most likely labeled as a runaway.

“I can't.” He finishes, clenching his hands into fists. “I can't, I-”

“Hey, don't worry about it.” Ponk says evenly, seeming to see the beginning of Sam’s spiral into panic. “You don't have to do anything you don't want to do.”

Sam huffs. Isn't that the novelty of the century?

“I- I want to do *something*,” He stresses, wrapping his arms around himself. “I don't- it feels *wrong* to just... pretend it never happened.”

“Well... what are some other ways humans honor the dead?”

Sam steals a table from a storage closet and drags it into an unused workshop that he had recently claimed as his. None of the others had complained about his siege of the room. He thinks they're just glad he’s doing something other than wallowing in misery.

He sets the table up in a place of honor against a far wall before setting a cylindrical piece of wood on top of it and covering the whole thing in a piece of red fabric he had pilfered from

Ponk's closet. He hopes his friend doesn't miss it too much, because Sam will not be giving it back.

For a while, he doesn't put anything on it. He lets it sit, an empty testimony to someone he had loved. It takes him three days to gather his nerves together and write a letter. Or try to, at least. He had ended up tearing it into pieces and throwing them into the trash.

The first thing he had put on it was Tommy's picture in a handmade picture frame. The only one he had was the one he had taken from the ship, which, while not how he'd like to remember the kid, is his only option at the moment. Maybe he can find an artist who knows how to keep their mouth shut one day and can commission a portrait of him smiling.

He sits at the altar a lot. Sometimes the others join them, but most give him his space, which he appreciates. The only one he doesn't mind coming to the altar is Ponk. He is always quiet, willing to listen to Sam's stories about the younger boy. Willing to look away when Sam starts to cry.

He carves a cow out of soft wood. It's not very well made, roughly carved and sloppily painted, but Sam knows Tommy would have liked it, so he leaves it on the altar. His catatonic spells become further and further apart. He's able to eat with the others. He can smile again.

He still can't bring himself to write a letter.

It feels big. It feels real, like something a therapist would tell a child to do after losing a parent. There is all sorts of protocol for what to do when a child loses an adult, but what is an adult supposed to do when they lose a child?

Sam wasn't Tommy's father, hadn't even known him for that long, but on the ship, where no one had anything but companionship, they were close. Sam had dedicated himself to protecting Tommy, and he had failed in the grandest way possible. Now he's gone, and Sam doesn't even have the guts to hold a funeral. The guts to write a goodbye letter. He curses himself for his cowardice, but he still can't do it.

Besides the goodbye letters and the lack of a funeral, Sam is starting to feel better. He is still wracked with grief. Sam doubts that will ever go away, but he is able to function again. He can move and think and not be so consumed that he can do nothing but lay on his back and hope that his heart stops. He is starting to get along with the rest of the crew, to understand their excentricities, to find where he fits in with the group.

For all but one.

He still has not spoken to Bad.

They have made small talk, sure. Good-mornings and how-are-yous and the like, but they aren't communicating. They aren't talking about what they need to talk about. Sam doesn't want to. Bad clearly is in no hurry to address the elephant in the room.

Bad had given the order to take Sam. He hadn't known, and it isn't his fault, not really, but Sam still gets sick to his stomach whenever he thinks about it for too long.

So he avoids the captain. It's a poor plan on a ship this small, but what else is he meant to do? Go beyond base-level interactions with the person who ruined his life to get to the root of the

issue? No way. Sam is perfectly content avoiding the conversation until the day he dies. He hears the others talking about it, sometimes. They will whisper to Bad, encouraging him to just talk to Sam, which the captain always shoots down, insisting that Sam won't want to hear Bad's apologies. Sam is tired of other people deciding what he wants.

The conversation happens eight days after Sam sets up the altar.

He had a couple of space coins- he is not going to ask what they are called, rattling in the palm of his hand, planning on putting them on Tommy's altar. He wants to cover his bases in case the river stix exists. Sam hopes the grim reaper takes space money.

The door is open, which immediately sets off alarms in his head, that someone is trying to destroy the altar. It's a ridiculous fear, but it's there and it makes his breathing quicken, his hand clench around his coins, slinking forward to peek in the crack of the doorway.

Bad kneels at the bottom of the altar, looking up. Sam's first reaction is to rage, to storm into the room and demand Bad to back off, to stay away from the monument of his kid, but he stands still. He hears whispering, just barely loud enough to make out. It's in Common, difficult to understand, not the simplified sentences that most of the crew uses for him.

"-but he's getting better. I'm doing my best to look out for him, but he's been avoiding me. I can't blame him. I can't blame him if he resents me. Even if he hates me, I've been doing my best to help in small ways. I hope you can forgive me, wherever you are now."

He rises, unfolding his legs and towering to his full height. He stands, sighs, and brushes a hand over the edge of the table.

"I'm sorry." He breathes, shoulders slumped. He turns and meets eyes with Sam, halfway through the doorway. He freezes, eyes wide.

Sam doesn't scream, doesn't rage, doesn't feel the cold sleeping of hatred. He steps forward and kneels in front of the altar. Bad steps back, bristling in his nervousness.

"Sit down," Sam says softly, not taking his eyes off of the altar. The captain hesitates for a few seconds before sitting next to Sam, hands clenched anxiously in front of him. He never was very religious, but he's been praying more and more recently.

"Good Lord, may you guide his soul back to Earth," He says in English, bowing his head and shutting his eyes. He hears shifting fabric and knows Bad is mimicking his movement. "And allow him to walk in eternal peace with the souls of those who went before him. Allow us to meet again when I join him in death. Amen."

They are quiet for several seconds, Sam's eyes squeezed shut. Bad lets out a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry." He says for the hundredth time. Sam doesn't know if he's talking to Sam or to Tommy.

"I don't forgive you," Sam murmurs. "But... I think I will. In time. You didn't mean to hurt anyone but- but my kid is gone because of an order *you* gave. That can't be undone. I can't

pretend to be alright with that."

"I don't expect you to be." Bad says, eyes still facing forward, wet with tears. "You don't ever have to forgive me. I- I should have done things differently. I should have checked the other rooms."

Sam doesn't deny it. They both know it's true.

"I'm just- I'm so tired of being angry." Sam breathes. "I don't- I want to forgive you."

"I don't blame you for hating me."

"I don't hate you." Sam says, surprising even himself. Bad says nothing. "I'm angry. I'm scared and sad and bitter but I don't hate you. Even after everything you took me in, even after I attacked one of your own. You helped me try to find Tommy. I don't hate you."

"Do you think Tommy would have..." Bad asks, trailing off, eyes drifting back to the altar.

"He would have thrown a huge hissy fit that you left him behind." Sam snorts, the barest edge of a smile gracing his face. "But then he would have gotten over it. He would have liked all of you, I think. He would definitely try to get under your skin. Try to learn all the alien swear words just to annoy you, but he would have liked you."

Bad laughs wetly, brushing his hands under his eye, wiping away the tears that had begun to gather there.

"May I ask- what do human children like? What's something I can leave on his altar, if you're okay with it?"

"Candies," Sam says, leaning back a little. "That's pretty traditional. I'm leaving coins, which is an older tradition but I'm just covering my bases." He gestures to the cow figurine already gracing the altar. "Toys, flowers, if I can ever find any. I'll decorate it when a holiday comes around. Just... things he would have liked, I guess. I've been keeping an eye out for cool stones to leave for him."

Bad is quiet for a few seconds.

"So... Would it be alright for me to leave offerings as well?" He asks quietly. For a few seconds, Sam isn't sure. He still has something terrible in him, something that rots and oozes, but then some empty part of his heart sparks back to life and he nods.

They sit in silence for several minutes.

Sam is the first to leave, standing and walking out of the room after a murmured goodbye, leaving Bad to sit at the base of the altar, hands still clasped, head bowed.

The next time Sam returns, there are foil wrapped candies scattered on the lower tier of the altar. He smiles when he sees them, grateful that no one is around to see. He still needs time, and although this might not mean that he and Bad are *friends*, or that he completely forgives him, it's a step in the right direction.

Time marches forward. It doesn't all skid to a stop to let Sam grieve, the whole universe does not hold their breath or halt their days to make room for Tommy's memory.

Sam writes a letter.

Tommy,

It's been two months since I found the wreckage of the ship. I can't say exactly when you died, but it must have been around then. I hope this letter finds you well. I hope this letter finds you at all. I prayed that you'd end up back on Earth, or at least back in Earth's afterlife. I think we've both had enough of drifting around space to last us a lifetime.

It turns out the aliens who took me off of the ship are really nice. They didn't know I was sapient for a while, there were some misunderstandings, I tried to kill Ponk, who is like my best friend now. Things are good now, we've smoothed things out.

I had a really hard time getting along with the captain at first. He's the one who had given the order to take me off of the last ship, so when I found out you had died I was really angry with him. But he helped me find the ship, I never would have known if he hadn't done that. He had let me out of the cell as soon as he realized I was sapient.

I wish you were here. You would have liked them.

I don't want you to think I don't miss you. I miss you every minute of every day and I think I will feel some sense of guilt for not being able to save you until the day I die. I won't go into detail about how hard I took the news because a kid doesn't need to hear that kind of stuff (and I know you hate it when I call you a kid, but maybe if you acted your age I wouldn't have to).

I'm sorry this took me so long to write. It was so hard to make myself do it. Writing a goodbye letter makes it feel real. I miss you. I'm so sorry. I hope you can forgive me.

Goodbye, rest easy buddy.

(P.S.: If ghosts are real come visit!)

Sam heaves a shaky breath and seals the letter, hoping that Tommy's spirit won't be able to see all the tears that dot the paper. He sets it on the altar, weighed down with a shiny stone. He isn't worried about any of the others reading it. They wouldn't be able to understand written English, and besides, he trusts them not to snoop.

He stretches, listening to his back crack before standing up to leave. He brushes his fingers against the edge of the altar as he leaves.

“See you soon,” He whispers, turning out the lights and shutting the door behind him. Ponk is leaning against the wall, waiting for Sam. He looks up to catch Sam’s eyes, beaming behind his mask, falling into step beside the human.

“Oh hey! Bad wants help making dinner, apparently whatever he’s making needs about fifty sets of hands.”

“He needs to stop choosing such complicated recipes.” Sam groans, rolling his neck. They walk in silence for a few seconds. Sam watches Ponk. He can tell the alien wants to say something.

“So... how are you doing?” Ponk asks. There it is.

“I’m... I’m okay.” Sam responds, opening the door to the kitchen. Somehow, it isn't a lie.

They help Bad make something passable for dinner before sitting around the table and eating it together, as a crew.

It feels like home.

Universal Constants

Chapter Summary

sorry for the late update i was camping and also school prep and work -_-

cw:

-vomiting

-panic attacks

He had realized it during an arm wrestling tournament.

Ponk had roped the whole crew into it, losing almost every round. Bad had just thoroughly thrashed him, beat him so hard that Sam was a little worried he would snap Ponk's remaining arm in half, but Ponk just laughed in that chittering way he does. It sounded like cicadas, it makes Sam think of summer on Earth.

Sam was the next in the gauntlet, Ponk having positioned him last, what with him being the 'biggest threat' which both flattered and offended Sam in equal measures.

"You ready to go down, human?" Ponk had asked, his eyes scrunched up into little yellow crescent moons.

"*Never*," Sam said, unable to mask his own smile as he sat his arm down on the table, hand extended. Ponk had grabbed it, his skin cool to the touch.

"Okay. Ponk, please don't lose another arm," Ant had drawled from where he was refereeing from the back of an armchair. "And...Go!"

It shouldn't have been a struggle to beat Ponk, but Sam had found himself hesitating anyway, unwilling to let go of his friend's hand. He had watched Ponk's face, what little he could see of it beyond the mask, anyway, scrunch up in concentration, straining in their attempts to beat Sam. His skin was fascinating to feel against Sam's, smooth, with scaled ridges tracing up his clawed fingers. The crew cheered, some rooting for him, some for Ponk, but Sam could barely hear it, all other noise drowned out. For a moment he had been worried he had been spacing out again, but he could still think. He could still feel.

Sam's hand slammed into the table, and then Ponk was standing on his chair, whooping and hollering, throwing his arm up in celebration. He, of course, had toppled over almost immediately, the chair sliding out from under his feet. Sam caught him before he could hit any of the numerous sharp edges that adorned the kitchen. For a second, Sam didn't say anything, just stared at the alien in his arms.

"You are your own worst enemy." Is what he had landed on, his head still spinning for a reason he can't quite place.

"You love me," Ponk had teased, smacking his shoulder playfully. He had set them back onto their feet and let him celebrate his victory. Sam had stared after him, reeling.

Ponk had put it into words, however unintentionally.

He loves Ponk.

The realization sent him spiraling where he stood.

How could it not? What is he *doing*? Laughing and smiling and doing *arm wrestling contests*? Has he forgotten what it took to get here? Everything that he's lost? How can he stand to be happy- how can he be falling in *love*? How dare he keep living when no one else had?

He had smiled at his crew, though he's sure it was unconvincing, cracked somewhere along his sharp teeth and clenched fists.

He made some excuse, one he can't remember now, but was surely as flimsy as his smile and had slinked off to a secluded area where he could freak out in peace.

That had lead him to where he is now, crouched on the bathroom floor with his hands clenched in his hair, teeth clenched, shoulders shaking.

It isn't fair to Tommy's memory, that he gets to live on like this. It isn't fair that he can live his life when Tommy can't. It should be *Tommy* in his place, making friends and falling in love. It's not fair. None of it is fair. None of it makes sense.

Sam pants, his breath catching in his throat, choking him. He feels like he's going to vomit. He chokes back the bile rising in his throat, only to have it nearly come back up again when there is a knock on the door.

"Sam?" Ponk calls through the door. "Are you okay? You ran out of there pretty fast."

Sam doesn't grace him with a response, the sudden appearance of the source of his woes shattering all his focus and sending him scrambling for the toilet. He clutches the rim, face hot as he tries to swallow back the vomit threatening to come up his throat. He fails miserably, and can't stop his stomach from contracting and forcing him to heave up the remainder of his breakfast. He hears Ponk calling out in the hallway, his voice significantly more panicked than before.

This, Sam supposes as he shudders his way through another route of vomiting, is at least a good excuse for why he had rushed out of the room.

Once he's finished and is left slumped over the cold metal of the toilet, panting, he can hear Ponk beyond the drumming of his blood in his ears.

"-getting sick?"

"No," Sam croaks out. Sam doesn't even have to see Ponk to know that the alien doesn't believe him for a second. He can *feel* the stink eye from beyond the wall.

"Coughing your guts out is just something you *do*?"

"It could be, you don't know." Sam calls back, his spirits lifting at the bantering. His heart sinks right back down into his unsettled stomach at the reminder of why he's so upset. The warmth that glows in him at just hearing Ponk's voice.

"I need to be alone," Sam says, hating the way his voice cracks. Ponk is quiet for several seconds. When he speaks again it is quiet, halting. Sam wishes he wasn't the cause of it.

"Okay," He says. Sam can imagine him stepping away from the door. "You know where to find me if you need me."

"Sure." Sam chokes out, his knuckles going white with how hard he clutches the rim of the toilet bowl. "I'll see you later."

The thing about avoiding someone on a spaceship is that it's very hard to do inconspicuously. There isn't much he can do to avoid Ponk when he walks into a room beside halt whatever conversation he'd been having and tearing out of the room like he's being chased by a pack of wild dogs. It's extremely obvious every time he does it, sprinting the other way every time he sees the flash of a leaf-tipped tail.

He only makes it a few hours before someone tries to ask him about it. As much as he would love to make up some wonderfully convincing lie, all he manages to do is laugh a bit too sharply and walk backward out of the room. What is *wrong* with him?

That's the thought that seems to stick. Later, when he's lying down on Ponk's floor, back to the wall, pretending to sleep, it runs in his mind on a loop.

What is wrong with him?

How can he ignore the guilt that rises up whenever he meets eyes with Ponk? And how can he explain what he is feeling? He's not stupid, he knows Ponk has some sort of fascination with humans. One that might not even be entirely innocent, if the books scattered over his desk are any indication, but that's just it. A fascination, a fantasy. Sam is sure there are many people on Earth who feel the same about aliens, but Ponk is goodhearted. He never makes a move on Sam, even when he sleeps mere feet away. Sam rolls over to face the alien, sure now that he is asleep. He can't see his face, of course. He never can, but now not even the shape of his mask is out, obscured by the thin blankets he's wrapped around himself. Sam yearns to join him, to climb beneath the blankets and wrap his arms around him. Another jolt of disgust sends him back to the wall, hand clenched in his shirt.

He shouldn't be thinking this. He should be grieving. He shouldn't have room for any other emotion.

Deep down, he knows that this is unreasonable. That he misses Tommy like a phantom limb every day, that no amount of grief should stop someone from living, but knowing is not enough. He brings a hand up to scrub his face, sighing as he rises from his blanket pile, wrapping the softest one around his shoulders as he walks out the door, keeping his footsteps silent as he pads down the hall.

He doesn't have a destination in mind, but he ends up in the kitchen. He would always get something to eat after a nightmare when he was back on Earth, and old habits die hard. Sam opens the fridge, rooting around to find something sweet or heavy enough to send him to sleep. He doesn't find much. They haven't been able to stock up on supplies while Sam's been on board, which will have to be remedied soon. They can't just never land again.

It's easier like this, Sam thinks as he sets out an armful of ingredients on the counter. To think about things like how to land the ship and what to cook. Easier than untangling his emotions. Easier than dealing with the pit of grief that has been eating him from the inside ever since he found that blood-soaked room.

He chops roots and soaks grains, he tries to make something easy and palatable with ingredients he knows nothing about. He sets it all out on a plate and sits in a nook pressed against a window, watching the stars zip by. He hopes his impromptu meal doesn't poison him. He's pretty sure all the ingredients are edible, but he has no way of knowing if they will produce something new when combined. Sam takes a bite, pushes through the immediate desire to spit out the unfamiliar flavors, and swallows.

It's not... bad. It isn't something he ever would have eaten on Earth, but hey. He's not on Earth. He probably won't ever be on Earth again.

The thought makes him sigh, setting his food down as he stares out the window.

What is he doing?

"Sam." Comes a voice from the doorway, making the human jolt, kicking out and knocking the plate to the ground. It's Ponk, standing in the entrance to the kitchen, backlit by the hallway light. They don't do anything for a few seconds, just watch each other. Like two mirrored threats, unsure of which one is going to strike first.

"Why are you avoiding me?" Ponk asks, stepping over Sam's broken plate and sitting on the other side of the nook. Sam draws in on himself, eager to put as much space between them as he can. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No!" Sam says quickly. He may not be able to speak to Ponk right now, but he doesn't want him to think it's his fault. This is Sam's own shortcomings. Not Ponk's

"Then *what?*" Ponk asks, bringing his hands up desperately. It hits Sam for the first time how much stress he must be causing Ponk. He's the one who nearly killed the alien, who took his arm, who now sleeps on his floor like a silent predator.

"You can't keep pushing me away," Ponk says in response to Sam's silence. "I want to be able to help you, but I don't know how to if you shut everyone out. I know this is hard, and I know you're hurting, and maybe something in you just wants to *keep* hurting because it's easier but- but I don't want to see you hurt."

Ponk is so close to him now, leaning in, emotional, fiery. Sam has no more room to move away, but he wouldn't even if he could.

"And I don't want to be the one who hurts you." Ponk finishes, eyes wide and shiny.

Sam is not always impulsive. Occasionally, in emotional moments he can be, but he prefers to plan things.

He does not plan this.

Before he even knows he's doing it he has put a hand on the back of Ponk's head and leaned in to close the gap. Ponk is nearly in his lap, their chests pushed together. Sam can feel the alien breathing. He can feel the chill of his friend's skin and he's sure the alien can feel the heat radiating off of his. He can feel how delicate Ponk seems beneath his hands.

Their faces are so close. They're *so* close but Sam wants to be closer. He wants to swoop in and kiss Ponk until neither of them can breathe. He wants to shut his eyes and know that he's going to be okay. He wants. He wants.

Sam's next breath sounds like a shuddering sob as he presses their foreheads together.

"Tell me to stop." Sam pleads, hands tightening where they grab Ponk. He feels how the alien's hands tremble as they wrap around Sam's neck.

Ponk doesn't speak, just lets out a strange clicking noise and surges forward, smushing their faces together. Sam squeaks in shock, steadying them by leaning against the wall. It isn't kissing. Not really, with the mask on it's more like them pushing their faces together. Sam pulls back, face hot.

"Wait, hold on, I want- I-" Sam can't find the words. He makes a motion like he's pulling a mask up his face, and Ponk seems to get the gist, yanking the mask up to where Sam assumes his nose is.

His mouth is human- *shaped* , though the canines are much much sharper and there is a set of small mandibles poking out of the corners of his lips, but you know what. Sam has seen weirder.

He surges in for a much gentler kiss, cupping the sides of Ponk's face. He lets the alien melt against him, making a noise that sounds somewhere in between a cricket's chirp and a cat's purr. Sam only lets go to breathe, and when he does he buries his face in Ponk's shoulder.

"I don't want this to just be physical," Sam rushes out, voice muffled by Ponk's flight jacket.

"I know you have a... thing with humans, but I want- I want to actually be with you."

"You noticed the human thing?" Ponk asks, looking absolutely horrified.

"It was... kind of hard not to," Sam says with an apologetic wince. "With all the... books."

"Ohhhh, this is so embarrassing." Ponk groans, hiding his face. "I must have seemed like such a creep."

"Not really," Sam hums, huffing out of his nose onto Ponk's neck, making the alien shudder.

They sit there for a while, holding onto each other, watching the stars streak past.

"No one's ever done something like this before, huh?" Sam asks eventually.

"With humans? No. Interspecies dating isn't that uncommon for spacefarers, but... yeah. Not with a human."

"Outside of your books."

"Please. Stop talking."

“Well,” Sam says, adjusting Ponk on his lap so that his legs don't go numb. “There’s a first time for everything, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Ponk says. Sam can see his unmasked smile in the reflection of the window. “A first time for everything.”

The Pit

Chapter Summary

probably the lightest chapter in this fic so far

ALSO, updates are being moved from Saturdays at 9PM to Mondays. My work schedule changed recently and with school starting it is getting extremely difficult to finish chapters by Saturday.

They're broke.

Like, completely. They're running out of food, out of fuel, out of *everything* and it is entirely Sam's fault. They haven't landed to get supplies nor to 'do their job' as Antfrost had ominously put it, which Sam *thinks* means stealing but can't really prove, and as a result their pantries are bare and they're all hungry and irritable.

Sam can't help but feel guilty about it.

He is, to the best of his knowledge, an intergalactic boogeyman living illegally aboard the Badlands. This means that if anyone were to know he was aboard, they would immediately contact- according to Ponk, a much worse boogeyman, the Intergalactic Council, which is a stupid name if you ask Sam. They should have come up with something cooler.

Regardless, they're broke, Sam's hungry, and everyone is miserable. Bad has finally agreed to land after taking a look at his crew, agitated and snapping at each other, each one of them wound up with stress. Sam was immediately thrilled, eager to stretch his legs off of the ship, shaking off memories of orange trees and white stone, but Bad had told him in no uncertain terms that he would not be joining them on their resource-gathering mission, that it would put not only Sam, but all of them in serious danger. Sam had huffed and grumbled and promised to stay disguised, but none of it changed the Captain's mind. Ponk had insisted on staying with him, which Sam appreciates as much as he is irritated by. They hadn't, told any of the others about what had happened between them, but in the week or so that had passed since they had kissed, their time spent together has felt distinctly less platonic. They haven't really talked about what it means for them, nor about their species' incompatibility. For the most part, nothing has changed, besides a lot more hand touches and occasional kissing. Which Sam is still working on getting used to. Due to the whole... *mandible* thing. It's good, for the most part. Sam is sure Ponk is just staying behind to try to hang out with Sam, which is cute, but also foils Sam's plans of sneaking off of the ship to make the crew some money somehow.

So here he is, playing wall ball a little too aggressively while Ponk writes something on what looks like a laptop if laptops had holographic screens.

“It’s so stupid, I can’t stay locked up forever.” Sam grumbles as he catches the ball ricocheting back at him. “I need to stretch my legs.”

“You will stretch your legs,” Ponk says distantly, not looking up from his swath of text. “We’re going to an uninhabited planet next. You can chase prey animals until your heart’s content.”

“Humans don’t chase prey,” Sam murmurs. “We sneak up on it.” He launches the ball at the wall once more, cringing as it bounces into a light fixture hanging from the ceiling, making it swing wildly. Ponk shoots him a sidelong look.

“Very sneaky.” He says dryly, but Sam can hear the smile in his voice.

“Yeah well, I don’t see you offering any suggestions.”

“Because Bad is right,” Ponk says, shutting his laptop. “As much as I loathe to say it, this planet is bad news. There are tons of smugglers and murderers out there. No thank you.”

“So they wouldn’t be out of place?” Sam ponders. Ponk clicks in amusement before Sam can correct himself.

“So they wouldn’t be out of place if someone *saw me*.” Sam amends, an idea sparking. Ponk sits up a little straighter.

“No.” He says as sternly as he can manage. “I cannot even describe to you how bad of an idea this is.”

Sam grabs his mask from where it hangs on the back of a chair and sweeps to the door.

“No, no, no, no!” Ponk shouts after Sam, clinging onto his coverall and attempting to pull him back into the body of the ship. “Usually your ideas are good ones but this one is *very* bad!”

“It’ll be fine,” Sam assures, the idea of walking freely on solid, non-flying ground again too strong of a pull to resist. “I’ll be stealthy the whole time.”

Ponk’s eyes dart to the still swinging light.

“That was a fluke.” Sam insists, punching in the code to the main exit hatch that he had memorized by watching the others. He doesn’t know what most of the symbols on the keypad are, but he remembers the pattern they were pressed in. The door slides open, spilling sunlight into the room. Sam practically quivers in excitement, the feeling of the warmth of the sun on his skin making him feel awake in a way he hadn’t in a long time.

He shuts his eyes, letting the light soak over him, his breath leaving him in a woosh. Ponk has quieted, Sam is sure it is in no small part due to his expression, one he’s sure must of pure bliss.

“Fine.” Ponk grumbles, making Sam startle, looking to the smaller creature that stands beside him. “I’ll help you.”

“Really?” Sam asks, a little shocked that he had actually managed to get Ponk to agree to let him leave the ship. He had been half sure that the alien would rat him out to the crew the moment his boots touched soil.

“Yes,” Ponk groans, rolling his neck. “But I’m sure I’m going to regret it.”

“You’re the best!” Sam cheers, sweeping Ponk up into a hug. “Let’s go!”

The sun seems brighter than usual, which is confirmed when Sam looks up to see a star in the sky around the same size as Earth’s sun, nestled securely beside another, smaller star.

“Cool,” Sam breathes, a smile creeping onto his face. Despite his... unfortunate entry into space, he does consider himself lucky to be what is likely the only human that will ever see this place. The thought sends a pang of something hollow through his heart, but he swallows down the thickness in his throat and slides his mask over his face.

“Let’s find a crowd, I have an idea to make some money.” Sam whispers into Ponk’s ear. Or at least where Sam assumes his ear is. He could be wrong.

“I am still not a fan of this idea.” Ponk whispers back.

“You don’t even know what it is yet.”

“I don’t need to, the fact that you’re in public is bad enough.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the wild and fun one,” Sam snarks, and though his tone is light, a kernel of genuine annoyance lodges its way in Sam’s heart.

“I- I am, I just- I don’t want you to get hurt.” Ponk argues.

“I’m not-“

“Or *taken*, Sam! I didn’t want to say it, but the people that took you here are the same type of people that go to these planets!” Ponk rushes out. Sam shuts his mouth with a click of teeth, turning his face away from Ponk.

“Sam-“

“Let’s just go find a crowd, Ponk.” Sam says flatly before marching off in the direction of the milling groups of aliens, all swarming around market stalls. Sam half expects Ponk to call out for him, to try to stop him, or even just to call his bluff and go back onto the ship. For all the game he talks Sam is not brave nor stupid enough to wander this alien market by himself.

When they are unable to find a crowd of a suitable size, Sam decides to just make one himself.

“Have you heard about the fighting pit west of here?” He says to people in passing. They always say no, because there is- of course, no fighting pit. “Well, they’re putting on a show

with a *human* in an hour.” Then they usually ask what an hour is and Sam gives them his rough approximation of hours into- whatever it is that alien time measurement units are called. He’s not sure of the name honestly.

All the while Ponk is a ball of nerves, asking a hundred questions until Sam is able to shut him down with a simple ‘trust me’.

When an hour comes and goes, Sam is there, in the pit of his own making, which is really just a patch of dirt on an otherwise grassy plane, maskless, stalking the circle, gnashing his teeth at the aliens that surround him while Ponk charms them, talking them out of their money and into tickets to the show that Sam is about to put on. He had explained professional wrestling on the way here. Not the dangerous stuff like MMA, but the theatrical wrestling, the gaudy costumes and fake-out punches, how much money the stuntmen in shiny costumes garnered. Ponk had agreed to be involved, but Sam is pretty sure that’s only because he knows that Sam is going to do it no matter what he says.

Ponk is giving some sort of speech to the crowd, which Sam is pretty sure means that the show is about to start. They had already planned how it's going to go, which one of them is going to win, what moves will be used and when. Sam isn’t nervous. This place is seedy, enough that it eliminates the chance of someone calling the council, and he’s sure that his reputation will provide enough reason for them to not try to take him captive. Hopefully.

Before he can worry about it too much Ponk has finished speaking, and he is looking to Sam expectantly. Sam crouches down into a fighting stance, narrowing his eyes and fighting to ward off the smile that plays at his lips. He has to remember not to get carried away, to keep in mind that he is not fighting a human. He eyes the stump that remains of the alien’s arm and thinks about the last time he had taken things too far. He shakes it off, vowing not to hurt anybody for real this time, and lunges at Ponk.

The alien strikes out with his tail and Sam rears back pretending he had been lashed across the face. He snarls and the crowd erupts into cheers. Sam falls back, circling Ponk and baring his teeth. He darts out to punch him, letting Ponk catch his fist and throw him back, sending Sam into a carefully choreographed stumble. The cheering gets louder. It’s working. Sam can’t help but smile, but it’s not like the crowd will know what his beaming means, so he lunges forward again.

It’s kind of like dancing, knowing exactly what will happen and when, knowing that neither of them are going to get hurt, not really.

It’s *fun*.

Or at least, it’s fun until a very tall figure is shouldering through the crowd.

“What is going *on* here?” Bad shouts, making the two of them freeze up. “Do you two have *any* idea how worried I was-“

Bad, Sam realizes, is going to blow their cover. And potentially get all of them killed.

Sam tackles him to the ground before he can say anything else incriminating, and the crowd roars. Sam grabs the clawed hands that reach up to throw him off and grapples, rolling so that Bad is pinning him.

“I’ll explain later,” Sam grunts in English, struggling under Bad’s weight. “Don’t blow our cover. Just follow my lead.”

“Uh- well, it looks like someone has stepped forward to battle the human! Place your bets people, this is going to be quite the showdown!” Ponk says from the middle of the pit, turning out to the crowd. He has a great stage presence, Sam will have to compliment that later. Sam snarls and puts his teeth in the crook of Bad’s neck, barely pressing down, and not nearly enough to break skin. Bad, ever the team player, howls in mock pain and rolls off of him, clutching his neck to stop the crowd from seeing that it’s uninjured. Adrenaline is rising up in Sam, making his head buzz in the best way. He can’t stop himself from smiling. High energy, low stakes, a screaming crowd, he can understand why people get so into this.

Sam lunges forward again, but Bad catches him around the middle before slamming him into the ground. It isn’t exactly *gentle*, but it doesn’t do anything more than knock the wind out of him, leaving Bad the opening to feign a harsh kick to the side of his head, making sure to kick up enough dust that the audience doesn’t see that his hoof never makes contact.

The dust settles around them, leaving Bad panting over his ‘unconscious’ form.

For a few seconds, there is nothing but dead silence. Then the crowd shrieks and whoops and chitters in all manners, so loudly that Sam has to stop himself from covering his ears.

“We have a winner!” Ponk shouts. “But this isn’t over, folks! Who knows when the human will take his revenge?”

With that verbal cliffhanger, Bad scoops Sam’s limp form over his shoulder and starts making his way back to the ship.

“I hope you understand how upset I am.” Bad says once they are out of earshot of the crowd.

“Yeah, we kind of figured you would be.” Ponk says.

“You put not only yourself in danger, Ponk, but Sam too!”

“Hey hold on,” Sam says, writhing enough that Bad puts him down, letting him walk alongside the two of them. “This was *my* idea! You haven’t been able to make money because *I’m* on the ship, so it makes sense that I should be the one to work on making us rich.”

“We don’t *need* to be rich,” Bad stresses. “We need to be *safe*.”

“We need to *e at!*” Sam says, bristling. “This is *my* fault, and since I’ve been up here I haven’t been able to help a *nyone* so just let me do this!”

There is a beat of silence before Bad slumps.

“I can see I won’t be able to stop you.” He sighs. “Just... be safe. Okay?”

“We should get the whole team on this!” Ponk says as they continue the walk back to the ship. “A rotating cast of fighters, we could even have cool code names!”

“No.” Bad says dryly.

“I don’t know Bad, you were pretty natural out there.” Sam teases. “Much more believable for you to beat me than Ponk. No offense.”

“None taken,” Ponk says. “You did rip my arm off.”

“Yeah, I’m still sorry about that.”

“I mean, it’s kind of cool.” Ponk says, shrugging the shoulder not attached to an arm. “If I had to lose my arm I’d rather have it taken off by a human than anything else.”

“How about no one takes off any more limbs?” Bad tries, but it’s too late, Sam and Ponk are already discussing best and worse ways to lose their arms.

“Woodchipper,” Sam says firmly.

“I don’t know what that is,” Ponk complains.

“I’ll draw a picture of it back on the ship, and oh! While I’m at it we should come up with cool alter ego names for our wrestling personas! That’s a must.”

“I’m down. I can be called Woodchipper.”

“That isn’t- I mean I guess that could work, but we can do something better.” Sam promises, patting Ponk on the back.

They step back into the ship, ready to explain to the rest of the crew how they had returned with hundreds of credits more than they had left with, and why the planet is suddenly full of rumors of a bloodthirsty human.

Ghost

Chapter Summary

Tee hee

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Sam thinks back on it now, he can't believe how hopeless he had been. How sure he was that losing Tommy was the end. Had he gone back and told his past self how okay everything would turn out he would have- well. He probably would have murdered his future self in a grief fueled rage.

He separates himself from where he curls around Ponk, who grumbles at the sudden loss of heat, cold-blooded as he is. Sam smiles and tosses their blanket, still warm from Sam's body heat, over his partner, who settles immediately.

He huffs out his nose in amusement before turning away from the bed, stretching his arms up over his head, listening to his back cracking.

They've been on planet this week, another shady market they're squeezing all the money they can out of. They've been grounded for three days, which means they'll have to move soon. As lucrative as this planet is, it's too risky to stay in one place too long. Especially with the way they've been advertising their fights to the general public.

It's their last day on planet, Bad is fighting him today, like he usually does, being the heartiest member of the crew besides Sam lets both of them let loose a little more than they could with any of the others. It's something he and Bad had talked about, even bonded over. The fact that both of their species tend to be damage dealing power-houses, leading to a lot of anxiety when living in a confined space with other, less terrifying aliens.

Sam stretches again as he winds down the hall towards the airlock doors, where, sure enough, Bad is waiting for him, typing something into his wrist mounted communicator. He glances up at Sam and smiles, shutting his watch down and typing his code into the door panel. Sam stretches as the massive door hisses open, rolling his shoulders and leaning down to touch his toes. Excited for the day ahead.

The exercise that sparring brings helps and hurts him in equal measures. The extra movement and exercise that fighting brings is a boon, and his unnatural, experiment born temper has been cooled significantly since they had started their stage fights. On the other hand, getting knocked around and slammed into things for multiple days in a row every few weeks is not as good for him. Whatever the experiments had done to make him more dangerous had also

made him something of a glass cannon, able to dole out devastating attacks, but not take them nearly as well.

That had been a bit of a mess to find out, coming back to the ship after a staged battle with his back one big mottled bruise and two broken ribs, as confirmed by Ponk's homemade x-ray machine.

For a while after that, the stage fights had been put on hold, his crew too afraid to lay hands on him out of fear of hurting him in a way that he couldn't bounce back from. It had taken a lot of convincing on Sam's part, but he was eventually able to convince the others to get back into the ring with him, as they had been doing for the past several months. It's good money, and it's even better for Sam's mental health, being able to get out of the ship every once in a while and let off some steam, stopping him from staying cooped up in his lab, working on inventions that would likely never see the light of day apart from his crew.

He steps out into the sun, the sky, cloudless as always, shines above them, the heat spreading over Sam's face, into his eyes. He sneezes into his mask, which is gross, but he can't take it off to clean it now that he's outside so he's just going to have to deal with it.

"Bless you." Bad says politely.

"Thanks." Sam sighs. "You ready to make that paper?"

"Always." Bad says, a small smile on his face. "But are you sure you want to do it today? If you're too sore from yesterday's fight then we can do a rain check."

Sam grimaces at the memory of yesterday's battle. It had been the first time he had fought against Puffy, who had apparently not been briefed on the fact that a creature with horns headbutting a human in the stomach was going to end the fight before it even began. The crowd had not been pleased when Sam had ended up on the ground, clutching his stomach and taking deep breaths not even thirty seconds after the bell had rung.

"I'm fine." Sam says, which is only partially a lie. His entire front is still significantly sore, but he's not down for the count, and he's certainly well enough to fight today. After all, it's their last day on planet, and who knows when they're going to stop again.

"If you say so," Bad says with a shrug. "I'll go easy on you just in case. I mean, it's the only way you'll win anyway."

Bad is sprinting ahead before Sam can process what he had said, cackling madly.

"HEY!" Sam shouts after him, his wide smile covered by his mask. "I could beat you into next Sunday!" He calls as he chases after his friend, recognizing the path he's taking to the arena they had set up in an abandoned stall in one of the less densely populated parts of the market.

He's tempted to race Bad, but it will be much more satisfying to win their ensuing fight, as tempting as it is, he doesn't want to waste his energy on a childish race.

At least until Bad turns around, still running.

“Race ya!” He calls behind him.

Okay, screw saving his strength, he’s winning this stupid race.

Humans are not meant to run fast. Sam decides this as he lays on the floor of the arena, panting so hard that he’s drooling a little. Bad doesn't even look winded, doing some light stretches by the door.

“Shut up.” Sam says, voice muffled by both his mask and the floor.

“I didn't say anything,” Bad says, amused. Sam shakes his fist at him weakly.

“Come on, get up.” Bad says, tugging at his outstretched arm. “We’ve gotta warm up or one of us is going to pull a muscle.”

“You can say ‘Sam is going to pull a muscle because his body is a horrorshow’. It’s okay, I won’t get upset.”

“I was not going to say that!” Bad sputters.

“You were thinking it,” Sam teases, smiling as he rolls his shoulders. Despite everything, he enjoys the easygoing camaraderie they are able to have. He’s grateful that the past is behind them.

Warm-ups last for about an hour, usually, though that mainly depends on when Sam is able to roll out of bed. He made good time today, and it seems like a pretty good day pain-wise so far, so they get the full hour, spent bantering and stretching, occasionally practicing the complicated preplanned fighting routine that they have set up. They’ll improve some of it, but it’s helpful to know which one of them will win in this fight, and when.

Sam retreats to hide behind the stage when people start to trickle in and stand in the front row. They don't have seating, because where would they find the chairs, so it’s a standing room venue. Bad stays up front to hype people up and collect both admission and betting money. Once they get all the bets settled, Bad and Sam will pick which way the fight will go, whoever has more money put on them will lose, putting them at a massive profit.

Six months ago, Sam would have thought that rigging an illegal fighting ring with a crew of pirates would be immoral, but now... well, he still thinks it’s immoral, but the people they’re scamming have probably done much worse than they have, so Sam calls it a draw.

Bad ducks behind the stage.

“I’m winning today,” He whispers to Sam. The human nods in response before pulling his mask over his face. “Five minutes til.”

“Got it. Break a leg.”

“No, I said I was winning.”

“Shut up, you know what I mean.”

Bad chuckles softly before moving back to the center stage and announcing that the show was about to start. Sam screws up his face at the roar of the crowd, the noise ringing in his head.

“Release him!” Bad cries out, and Sam lunges forward, pretending to have been confined in some way, crawling onto the stage, trying to embody every monster movie he’s ever seen, in movies or otherwise. The crowd gets louder. Sam breathes through his nose, his goggles fogging up on the inside, impairing his sight. It doesn't matter, he knows this routine. He could do it with his eyes shut.

He lunges for his friend, hands outstretched, reaching forward, his claws glinting in the muted sunlight. Bad meets him in the middle, his claws just as deadly, and a good bit larger. Their fingers intertwine, and then they are grappling, pretending to struggle against one another. Of course, there is no real struggle, but if the screeches and snarls of the crowd is anything to go by, then they are putting on a pretty convincing performance. Sam grabs Bad's wrists and throws him to the ropes, where Bad pretends to fall against them, snarling. He gets back up and grabs Sam by the hair, not enough to hurt, but enough to make it look convincing. His head is tugged backwards, roughly enough that, had he not been following the movement and been prepared for it, it would have wrenched his neck. He cries out in mock pain kicking out at his friend. He lands a kick to his hoof, sending one of Bad's legs out from under him, and bringing him to a kneel on the canvas floor. Sam goes down with him, the alien's claws still in his hair, and dodges with a roll, escaping Bad's grip. The crowd gets louder, but Sam lets the sound wash over him, tuning it out until it all sounds like the ocean, rising and falling with his breath, waves crashing against the shore.

Bad rolls away from him before he is able to strike, and grabs his leg, tugging him down, where he hits the ground harder than he had intended to. He winces at the pain in his wrist as he catches himself. That's gonna bruise, which means he'll have to wear long sleeves until it heals. He doesn't want Bad feeling guilty about accidentally hurting him during one of their sparring matches. That is a quick way for the money scamming scheme to end.

Bad is shoving him forward, snarling, sharp teeth on display, he leans down, teeth scraping against the bag of red- something. Sam thinks it might be jam, that he had taped to himself.

"That was supposed to be the finisher!" Sam hisses in English.

"I know, I thought it was on the other side! Just go with it!" Bad hisses back. Sam groans internally, but throws his head back with a cry of pain all the same, letting himself stumble backwards, hands coming up to staunch the 'bleeding', holding back a disgusted wince at the stickiness of the red concoction. Definitely some sort of jam.

He slumps backwards against the ropes, making a show of deep panicked breaths, as he watches his friend warily. The crowd roars, the ocean churning. Sam pushes himself back up

onto his feet, using the ropes to brace himself. He is hunching on himself now, making a show of being injured. He sure the people that bet on him are cursing their luck now. He holds back the smile at the thought that luck has absolutely nothing to do with it. He kinda loves scamming people. He'll think about what kind of person that makes him later.

The next part of the fight will be a choke hold, which is going to be an incredibly sticky experience for Bad, considering the fact that he is covered in a short layer of fur and Sam is completely soaked through with red jam on one side of his body. Sam smiles a little under his mask, taking petty revenge at the fact that they're both going to have to hit the showers after this fight.

He lurches forward, angling his friend into the right position, and bends him backwards, careful not to put any actual pressure on his windpipe

"This is what you get for not waiting for the big finale for the blood bag," Sam hisses as jam soaks through his clothes and into Bad's fur. He can hear Bad scoff a little as he is grabbed by the back of his jacket and thrown across the ring, landing in a practiced pose on his back without getting the wind knocked out of him. That had taken a lot of practice.

He rolls out of the way before Bad can attack. He tries to lift himself up, forgetting that he had bruised his arm earlier, and his wrists ache at the pressure.

"Ow," He murmurs, hopefully quietly enough that Bad won't hear it and badger him for actually getting injured. If he does notice, Bad doesn't have time to react because the next part of the plan is for Sam to enact what he had gleefully called, 'operation rodeo'. He dodges out of the way of Bad's next attack, widely telegraphed so that Sam can avoid it, and clings to Bad's horns, planting himself firmly on his back, pulling him backwards enough that the larger alien will stumble, and make a big show of how painful it is.

It's their first time during the rodeo routine in front of a crowd, and Sam can't help the smile that blooms over his face at the sheer ludicrousness of the action. The fact that anyone could think this overdramatized clown show of a fight would be real is laughable.

Bad shakes him off, and Sam falls to the ground, landing in a roll, ending up on his back so that Bad can feign out stomping on his chest. He lets out a breathy shriek, hoping he is convincing enough to build to him losing the fight.

Bad picks him up by the front of his coverall, where he hangs limply. He can feel the way Bad's claws are carefully held away from the thick fabric, careful not to tear it in any way that couldn't be repaired. For all of Bad's intimidation tactics and huge stature, he is surprisingly delicate with a sewing kit.

Perhaps not so delicate enough with Sam though, because when he is thrown across the ring, he is meant to land in the ropes, but instead his the back of his head meets the wooden pole of the ring, making stars swirl in his vision.

Past the black dots in his vision, he can see Bad covering his mouth in shock and taking a step forward. He wants to tell Bad to stop acting like he cares that Sam is getting hurt, lest he

ruin their show, and get them all thrown into space jail, but he doesn't get the chance, because the buckle on the back of his mask has broken, and his mask falls into his lap.

This is not a huge problem, considering they all already know that he's human, but it does make it a bit more dangerous in the sense of plausible deniability. If someone were to just walk by and see two people in a fighting ring, not a huge deal on a planet like this, but to see someone and a human in a fighting ring, having not been informed that this was happening, could be much more dangerous to Sam and his crew.

He doesn't get a chance to say anything at all- hell, he doesn't get the chance to do anything, because before any of them can move, there is someone from the crowd lunging forward into the ring. Sam has a moment of panic, thinking that some attention seeker is about to actually get one of them hurt, but another audience member, perhaps a friend trying to stop them from doing something monumentally stupid, grabs the back of their cloak. It does nothing to impede the intruder, but the cloak is ripped away from them, and Sam can see the pale limbs, the fingernails, the lanky body of something that is undeniably human. Their face is covered, but he knows that body. He knows it as well as he knows his own. This is someone from his own species, and that should not be possible. Sam isn't able to shake off the shock by the time the new human lunges forward at them and, with blunt nails barely visible through the cut off fingers of their gloves, tries to gouge Bad's eyes out. They don't quite manage to do it, they're tall, but not as nearly as tall as Bad, though they do manage to rake some shallow gashes over his friend's face. Sam can't find it in himself to be too upset, they are attempting to- Sam can only assume, save his life, which is honorable, but definitely not helpful.

Bad yelps, stumbling backwards, guarding his eyes from the attack. Sam rushes forward, grabbing the human around the waist, wincing internally at how thin they are. It's not really surprising, there are not a lot of nutrients in space that are for humans. Sam put it out of his mind, bringing the human up into a backbend, forcing their feet off of the ground, hopefully disorienting them enough that he can get them on the ground, and actually talk this out. He doesn't want to hurt them, he has a feeling they're pretty young, and his heart aches at the memory that this newcomers presence tries to dredge up. Regardless, he isn't going to hurt someone of his own kind, if they can't talk this out he may have to subdue, but he isn't going to hurt them. Not really.

He finds himself ripping over under the weight of the newcomer and realizes with a sting of dread that they definitely do not know how to land on their back without getting the wind knocked out of them.

Okay. He might have to hurt them a little bit.

He throws them onto their back, leaving them wheezing for breath, and is over them in no time flat, keeping them from getting back up, and putting on more of a show for the crowd. They still can't know he's sapient, after all.

The other human is still for a few moments, probably because they had been thrown on to their back onto a not exactly soft floor. When they move again, their hands shoot up to their face, and Sam is quick to try to pin their wrist down, afraid of an attempt on his eyes now that this other human has pinned him as an enemy. He misses his grab, and the human's hands get free, but it doesn't reach for Sam's face, it reaches for their own. They slips their fingers under

the edges of their mask, which is actually just goggles and a bandana that they pull down around their neck.

For a second, Sam does not processing what he's seeing.

He recognizes them, he knows that for sure. Humans are very good at pattern recognition, and he's very good at remembering faces. But for a solid three seconds, he cannot remember where he's seen this person before.

And then he thinks, the reason he can't remember where he's seen this person before is because he fully expected to never see this person again.

It's Tommy.

He's older, by just a little bit. He's in the light now, not just the cold darkness of Dreams ship. He's here.

Sam feels like he's dying. That's how many emotions go through him at once. He feels like throwing up, he feels like crying, he feels like laughing. He feels like he's going to die.

He doesn't die. Nor does he throw up or laugh or any of that. He reaches a hand out and he touches Tommy's face, only half sure that he's there. Thinking, maybe his brain is making up some horrible mirage, that this is just someone who is blonde and young and human, that he's forgotten Tommy's face after all this time. But he knows that isn't true, he sits by his altar every day, he stares up at his photo when he mourns for his lost soul.

His hand touches Tommy's cheek.

It's warm.

"Tommy?" Sam says, He can hear how choked up his voice is, but he's never cared less. "Kiddo?"

"Sam," Tommy chokes out, but he's smiling. He's smiling, and Sam is too, through his tears.

His son is alive.

Chapter End Notes

THE END OF SAMS INTERLUDE, thank you all so much for reading, I had a ton of fun with this one, and it was super cool to write most of it in such a drastically different tone.

The next one will be a bit shorter, but also heavily feature sam the man!

End Notes

Come visit the Human Error discord [here](#)

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